I, Lilith

Elizabeth Léonie Simpson

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Humanistic Education: An Interpretation (1976)
The American Revolutionary Experience: 1976 — (co-author, 1974)
Democracy's Stepchildren: A Study of Need and Belief (1971)
Five Poems (1970)
The Social Sciences: Concepts and Values (co-author, 1970)

For John Wurr,
to his own self most appropriately true.

To Jo Milgrum whose writing expanded the shadow of Lilith into full-bodied, accessible folklore and to Allan Rock who read both critically and helpfully, my thanks.

CHAPTER 1

Call it "Lilith" — the story I'm going to tell you. That's what you call me, Great Shadow whose heart I have ensnared. And that's who the story is about. But, before I can tell it and we can call it anything, first we have to settle down, to make ourselves comfortable on this parched land, in this arid clime, our home.

Lean closer, my handsome love. Away from those burning rocks. We will keep their molten music as background to our talk, but for now I want you near enough for me to see my reflection in your eyes. I want to know what you are receiving of my beauty before we begin, what you will be watching while I speak, what you will be enjoying as I spin my tale. I like to see myself in your eyes. It makes me feel as if I am a part of you.

Watching a reflection makes a pleasant game; I never get tired of it — unlike some of the other ones we play. Most pastimes wear out quickly. It's a good thing that you and I have made a pact to work at making up new ones. Since we'll both

live forever — and in each other's company — we've promised to keep each other entertained, using any means we can. We've agreed that stories are a good way to do that, so I'm going to begin now with one of my own. Not just a story — a history. Part of it you already know; most of it you don't. I won't be inventing, just telling you what really happened.

As I remember it, of course.

You can interrupt to ask things or to get me to elaborate as I go along, if you like. But if you disagree, you'd better keep it to yourself. I have as much power as you do and we must abide by our perpetual truce or there will be disaster for both of us. An end to eternity. Afterward, when I get bored or finish my account, you can have a turn at story-telling, at weaving me a narrative. I'll take the listener's role, then, winding the cloth from the loom and recording it, preserving its patterns for another day's examination and use, something ornamental for the times to come.

Here, let my owl perch on your shoulder while I make myself comfortable. I want to fold in my wings and arrange myself, become a little smaller, more compact.

There, there, my wise birdling, stop your fussing. You can come back now. Give us the cool wafture of those almost silent wings. Then settle down. I'm ready to begin and you can listen, too, if it pleases you.

This is the story of what I am, a tale about part of my existence. That's why I said, if it needs a name, that it should be called "Lilith." But it is also about other people — Adam, who was my first consort, and Eve who joined him later in the Garden of Eden. It is about our *ménage-à-trois* and what happened to us and to our children, what our combination — Adam's and mine — our combination of human and demon produced, back in the beginning of the peopled world.

It is about the Lord God Ineffable, too, of course, the Creator — a Holy Concept with more power than character to guide His choices. A jealous God who believes in punishment, not to

say vengeance, but who, if pushed — that is, if reminded of His Higher Capabilities — is capable of mercy, too.

(Are you listening, Lord? I'm being fair, aren't I? Including the Whole Complex Being.)

I'll start with my own origin. As is quite usual, I had a beginning but that was of minuscule importance compared to what came later. Vitality in beauty is a continuous creation. With good fortune it goes on forever, getting more complicated and interesting as it goes. Be that as it may, for centuries many people believed that I, like you, was made all at one time in Heaven by the Lord God. They believed that He invented us, constructing us out of His Own Imagination. You were the first-made son of God but why He designed you the way He did, no one pretends to know. While your creation was just one of His many unfathomable Acts, without any clear reason behind it, I know that for me He had a definite purpose in mind.

As craftsmen learn their products, developing them, altering them as they work, as they emerge from the chosen material, the Holy One came to know us through the process of making us. But neither one of us turned out exactly according to design and, in the end, He didn't like the result of His Efforts. For one thing, He hadn't expected to be defied by His own Creature and He resented it. Not long afterward, as soon as you began asserting your independence, you were cast out, rejected, branded as a rebel. He had made you proud, had given you a strong character on purpose, but He hadn't foreseen what the result would be.

You, with your pride and your talent, turned out to be a leader, not a follower. That was unfortunate for Him; He was afraid of competition.

He made His first Mistake then, didn't He? He should have known that you wouldn't submit to His Orders. Not without controversy, contradiction, or at least discussion as equal to equal. So He punished you with banishment, plunged you into

the Underworld where — He must admit — you have served as a useful, daunting adversary to your Maker ever since.

Everyone needs an opposite to define him- or herself. Without black sheep, white ones would be meaningless. Polarities are needed.

As for me, that was not when I was exiled. In those days I came to these Depths from time to time, whenever I wanted to, just as I wandered all over the earth by my own choice, under my own volition. But my creation itself was not a matter of my choosing. Adam had a part in that. Some say he asked for me, for a human mate, because he was tired of coupling with beasts. I don't know whether that is true or not, but I do know that any individual alone, any singleton, is an incomplete being. Even demons and angels need cohorts. As for mortals, they become fully human only when they are each joined with another. After his creation there was a part of Adam that was still missing and he was aware of it.

Almost from the moment of the Almighty's Conception of humanity, then, I had been planned for the paradise He was establishing on earth. I was to become Adam's mate, to be a mortal just like him. That was what God designed me to be. Adam's *mate*, not his *wife*. The category of "wife" had not yet come into being.

Yes, in the beginning His Intention was for there to be Adam and Lilith, not Adam and Eve. God blessed us both, telling us that we should

> "...be fertile and increase, fill the earth and control it; rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all living things that creep on earth."

That was our assignment. It wasn't a little one, was it!

Well, I will tell you that very quickly I had had my share of that earthly paradise, that blessed Garden of Eden. In fact, I had my share and more of it than I could take. The tasks He had given us were soon made routine. All except for the admo-

nition to be fertile and increase our kind. Not sexuality, but conception, we put off for a while. Why go to child-raising when you're having fun? At least we agreed with each other about that. Right from the start.

One of the things I do remember enjoying at first was our invention of oral language — an invention that became increasingly complicated as time went by. In the beginning, the Almighty had given us the ability to communicate through body language, through gesture, and the sounds that we needed to express our feelings. In Eden there was no need to warn about dangers; we never needed help. Because there were no traps, no perils, and no predators, He had made us speechless.

That didn't last long.

We worded the world, seeded it with interchangeable sound and watched it grow, nourished between us. We two did that, as soon as we realized that communicating by means of our bodies alone just wasn't enough. There was so much to inquire about, to share, so much meaning to explore. Using all the elements of vocal noise we could — aspects of tone and breath, stops and range — we devised a verbal language.

The first language for the human race.

That was enjoyable. And it was just the start of a process that has never ended; in one way or another, humans still do it every day. Changing usage, changing construction, modifying and adapting, adding and deleting or re-shaping meaning. We do it, too, don't we — you and I?

But besides the fun and games of speech, what else was there? Relaxation, time to spend however we wanted, balmy weather — sunshine during the daylight with soft, steady rain during many nights, delicious varieties of food. Joy without cease. No opportunity — and, at least at the start, no desire — for mischief. Total predictability. And no responsibilities, either.

Even some aspects of the invention of language came to have their boring side after a while. One was the continual, repetitious naming. Adam enjoyed it, but I soon got tired of such

endless, petty invention. Why name everything when what you need to know is the thing itself, not its name?

It wasn't long before the whole scene was all terribly dulling for me. The trouble was that it was impossible to put that sustained leisure to use. I need a rhythm of ebbs and flows to keep me stimulated, to make me feel that what I'm doing is worth the effort. Effort! Yes, that's it! That's what is needed. Too much ease, just like unending perfection or absolute evenness, is not my style. I enjoy a rent in the cloth of time and experience, some roughness to give texture to the smoothness of being. Soon my sense of stagnation began to affect my attitude toward the place. And toward the inhabitants of that Garden, too.

Things would have been different, I know, if Adam had been less predictable, more adventuresome. I was being suffocated by the tedium of too-sustained a duet. The unchanging relationship with him was what was most annoying, most dulling. You see, he was the only one. There was no other man to provide contrast, to supply the relief of comparison. And he was around so much that there was no escape from his sameness day after day, aeon after aeon. His smile, his walk, his appearance — even his conversation — all these were the constants of everyday life. As far as I was concerned, he was already a museum-piece, numbered and cataloged, preserved by his own predictability.

The Garden grew too small; there were lots of animals but too few of us, not enough people. Some intervention, some disruption, something new and interesting, was needed.

It was all so inert, like living in a vacuum and, to me, it looked as if it were going to go on that way forever. Indeed, as I quickly understood, that was the Lord God's intention. He had created what He believed would be an Eternal Constant.

Such permanency is degrading, but it can also be motivating. I was bored, not stiff into passivity, but into action, into changing things to make them more stimulating.

As you and I both know, evil has real utility. A serpent — anything negative — is needed to keep life in the fanciest of locations either lively or fluid. Without it, the world would be an empty bucket, a windless, smooth and barren desert. Blandness without end. Remember the Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, who wrote in the TAO TE CHING:

> "Under heaven all can see beauty as beauty only because there is ugliness. All can know good only because there is evil."

Was the Almighty Father responsible for the creation of evil, as well as good? Did He know what He was doing, the importance of contrast? Later, Adam and I were darkness and light mated, but at first our differences were not that obvious. They weren't until I helped myself to the fruit of *both* those special trees.

God hadn't told me that I wasn't supposed to eat the crops of those trees. I guess His Absent-Minded Lordship thought that, after Creation, Adam would pass all the rules he'd been given on to me. My lover told me a lot but he didn't tell me that one. Or, if he did, I wasn't listening. Not until it was too late.

By the time I made a meal from the apples on the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, I had already dined on the fruit from the other one. That was the Tree of Eternal Life and it was forbidden, too. My first tasting had only been an impulsive snack. Alone one afternoon, dawdling my way across a meadow, I had come on the precious tree. I had seen it before, but somehow that day I felt especially drawn to it. How good that fruit had looked to me, hanging in its abundant, golden ripeness! There were many apples and I only took one. Actually, I never had another opportunity. When I went back the next day to get more, all the fruit was gone from the tree.

Afterward I hadn't thought to mention my treat to Adam.

Of course, I didn't know then what the long-term effects of that choice of menu would be, how much I was going to outlive

him, the man whose life I was supposed to be sharing, that I did share too well and too long. Nothing in either of our lives was changed just then — that day when I, the thief, stole myself, snacked myself, into immortality.

It was not until I had tasted the fruit of the second tree and had learned the difference between good and evil that the ground of reality shifted. That was when I realized, without the shadow of a doubt, which of these two extremes — blessedness and wickedness — was for me. When I gave up the other forever.

As for Adam, he never made a clear-cut decision of that sort. He was never forced to and, unlike me, he left the choosing of good or bad actions to each situation as it occurred. Because of that, his life was more complicated after the Fall. He and Eve both had to keep struggling between pulls in opposite directions. They were harried by temptation, worried like a fresh piece of meat torn by a dog. I wasn't troubled by it. They fought sin; I yielded to it. So much simpler! Why not relax and enjoy it?

The first negative task — the first test of my chosen orientation — that I put myself to was no small one. It was to change the foundation of everything we shared. Yes, everything. To bring an end to Eden, to the banality of everyday life there in that sterile, perfect place.

Did you know that I was the cause of Adam and Eve's downfall — their expulsion from the Garden? I was. Of course, I left, too. Like the birds and other heavenly bodies, I am winged and some say that, when that pair had to leave, when they were confined to the rough surface of the earth, I was expelled, too. Not to the soil, but into a region of the air.

What nonsense!

It was my own choice, my pleasure, to fly, to test the endurance of these wings in trials beyond measure. Nothing could stop me. At all times, I was free to return, to stay close by that

primordial pair, to watch them and to interfere whenever I wanted to. I did that for years, for the length of their lives.

It was later that I roamed into what had become Sumer, Egypt and the Babylonian wilderness. These places were much to my liking. It was during my travels there that I first knew myself to be a demon through and through. It was there that, for moon after moon, I made my nightly forays, developed the specialities, the area of expertness, that made me notorious: frightening pregnant women and children.

From time to time, I sought out men, too, but it was the others that I put my craft to threatening. In a little while I'll tell you why they were the ones I was after. That's all part of my life story.

Is it a "life story" when it doesn't end in death? I wonder. Anyway, the term will serve for now. You can make up another later, if you like.

You've heard of some of these deeds before? No doubt my reputation has exceeded my actions. Reputations usually do. Do one novel, unusual deed and, in the eyes or ears of the public, it's extrapolated into a thousand. Certainly, over the generations, word of mouth has enhanced my fame, decorated and enlarged it. In the Seventh Century, before the Common Era, there were still many who recognized me and respected my powers. In northern Syria, for example, there were plaques carved out with my image and these words:

> To the female demon that flies in the dark chamber:
> pass by, time and again, Lilith!

During the Middle Ages, Jews were still manufacturing amulets to keep my lustful squat from disrupting their households. All of us female demons have been known for our sexual prowess. You know that as well as I do. And, unlike what is usually believed about our gender, we prefer being on top of our victims. Ancient matriarchs — and some more recent ones

— have continued that tradition. It is the posture of dominance, isn't it? A symbol of who's "on top."

Even the Christians living in those Middle Ages believed in my power. Monks who had taken vows of celibacy went to sleep crossing their hands over their genitals, clutching a crucifix. As if I would waste my time on the weaklings!

And if a male child laughed in his sleep, they said I was there, invisible, fondling his sexual parts. Who could tell? It might have been so; sometimes I did do that.

Even today some humans are afraid of me. They speak of me in whispers, use my name to frighten their children into being obedient. "Lilith will get you!," they warn, calling me a "night monster" or a "vampire," attributing crucial, overwhelming powers to me, powers that only the likes of you have now. Those forces they have no control over, those that affect their lives for the worse.

Ah, would it were still so!

What I'm telling you will remind you that I was not always the way I am now. You must have some memories of my full glory. Those were the days! But if the earthly people don't know that the past has been partially erased and the remainder re-ordered, well, so much the better for me. What I was has been confined and restricted by laws — His laws. I may not be what I once was, but I still enjoy the fear, the trembling, the attempts to hide, that my name arouses.

So, in spite of these changes, all is not lost. The truth is that I still have many of the powers attributed to me. I could still destroy any form of life if there were no interfering — and powerful — Being looking after it. On a lesser level, there are still some other traits I developed that have worked greatly to my advantage. For a long time. For example, the wings and fangs that I grew. If I choose to use those wings, I can fly. I can also see in the dark which means I can hunt when others are fumbling or sleeping. I never have needed to sleep. That's why

I've always preferred travelling in the night's darkness, avoiding the sun's watchful eye.

More advantages came with concealment than with exposure.

I'm sure you understand that.

That's also why I was given my name, the Hebrew word "Lilith." It comes from the Semitic root with a slightly different spelling — a word which means "night."

Those people who have been afraid of me were right to be frightened. Over the centuries my new traits developed and I gradually became a full-fledged demon. You and I are well matched now. Even by the time I went to Sumer, about 2400 years before the Christian Era, I was already an immortal harlot and a vampire, never satisfying my lovers, never releasing them. Sooner or later, I killed them with a tiny, tidy bite at the throat, leaving behind the characteristic mark of my fangs — a triangular wound like the bite of a leech — as a reminder and a warning.

I've never bitten you. It wouldn't do any good, would it? My fangs wouldn't even leave a mark. You are made of sterner stuff, of baser metal. Impenetrable.

One of my gifts has been to leave my lovers frantic for more; they died still yearning, still lustful. But, of course, things were different with my first lover. I satisfied Adam as well as increased his appetite. Nor could I have imagined killing him; he was a subsidiary portion of my life but, for a long time, I would have missed him if he were no longer there. And in the end I even released him, let him go free from me. But what I'm talking about now was long before that. In the beginning.

How I do enjoy provoking fear! I've always done what I could to arouse it and, once it appeared in the tiniest crack, to encourage its growth, to increase it, to feed it. We have that in common, don't we?

So, although I started out one of their kind, a human being, I was not like them for long. And, even when I had some

similarities, one of them was never doing what I was told to do. I was never obedient. Even the most All-Powerful, Dominant Ruler would never say that I was really submissive. Submission was Adam's invention, his idea of what his opposite should be like. It came *after* me, not with me. I was never that type of being, not one of those "female" ones, with all the weakness the word has come to imply.

The dark side of femininity is what interests me. The power we have over life itself, its production and its destruction, and subsets of both of those: the power of seduction and lechery. Today some say there was no sexuality in the Garden of Eden. They don't know what they're talking about. We were not designed to be neutral, neutered virgins or eunuchs, but to enjoy the flesh in all its pleasures. To *enjoy!*

You know that I have always had a mind of my own. I believe in, and I exercise, my own free will. There'll never be a day when I'll be dependent on any creature, human or otherwise. (Excepting God Almighty, of course. There is no way around that.) And that includes you. But we are two of a kind, aren't we?

An Italian poet, Dante, once wrote that you believed it was "...better to rule in Hell, than serve in Heaven." I believe that, too. If you don't have freedom of choice, what do you have?

CHAPTER 2

What is everyday, Monday-through-Sunday, reality? Based on commonplace report, the stories we hear, the history we learn, it is all fiction. Every bit of it. You and I, every individual — each of us — receives with unique eyes; each of us has his or her own idea of what's true. We shape it to our liking, to our understanding of what it ought to be. When you get down to the bare bones of what's being transmitted, what's being discussed, what we're trying to share on the simplest level, nobody really agrees. Even about a description of the weather. All our perceptions and interpretations overlap just a little. Enough to communicate marginally. Enough to get along most of the time.

If we want to.

So history is just somebody's own version of a particular story that he or she would like to believe and have others believe, too. That is why those who tell it usually place the action in the distant past. That way it's harder to check on the accuracy of

what's being told. The people living at the time it happened wouldn't have reported or interpreted it in the same way as those who came afterward.

Take, for example, what's been reported about the beginnings of human life — what everybody thinks is true about Adam and Eve. The usual account — the one that has been swallowed most widely — is only a part of a fat, well-seasoned reality. And a lean part — a gristly, bony portion — at that.

I tried to get the Babylonian scribes to write what I told them had really taken place then. I tried over and over again. After all, I was there! But, even when I insisted, they wouldn't put it down my way. Those guardians of the future didn't agree with what I wanted said, what I wanted the official memory to be. That was just another case, one of many examples, of people not wanting their beliefs to be endangered. They wanted to record the reality they thought most appropriate, the one that they themselves had constructed and, to do that, they had to reject mine. Along with any other mismatches.

Doubts are never welcomed, contradictions never seen as desirable. But if their idea of facts didn't agree with mine, so much the worse for them. Anyway, as I've been telling you, there is scant written record of these events. And nothing that can be proven. But then, no system can prove its own truth within itself. People just don't want to recognize that objectivity doesn't exist. They don't want to admit it. If they did, they would have to agree with someone else's version of reality. And give up a part of their own.

The fact is that it's not what we know or believe we know but what we do about it that really matters.

I have to admit that, regardless of how it has been reported, for some people what I said earlier about my own creation was not entirely true. It doesn't matter, does it? *Noli fabulam bonam veritate inficere.* Don't spoil a good story with the truth. This recent God — made in man's grandfatherly image, old and bearded — did not dream me up or invent me. I was around

before He was. And I lived long before the Garden of Eden was ever imagined, before human consciousness created a masculine God. In the beginning I was the great female deity, the earth mother incorporating the full range of experience. In recent times, for ease of recognition, each of my complex and contradictory traits has been attributed to only one of the two distinct sexes.

Yes, there was a time when I embodied all this: faithful love, fertility and nurturing, as well as aggression, promiscuity and death. The production of life and its destruction. Both.

The truth is never a single, simple message, even when you want it to be.

Believe me, though, about one thing. It is true that it was I, not the still unimagined Eve, who was designated by the Eternal and Imperial Majesty to be Adam's mate. I, not Eve, was deemed to be his equal. According to at least one still prevalent version of the story, I was brought into being at the same time that Adam was, but on my own. I came from the stuff of the embryo cosmos: soil and water, rock and air, flesh and fire, slime and light. Just the way it was recorded that he did.

Clearly, I was no Eve. I wasn't made of secondary happenscratch plasma; I wasn't made from unnecessary parts, from the leftover meat and rib of Adam's body. Adam and I were both blessed by God, both summoned to rule in benevolence over the other creatures of the earth. In perpetuity.

And that was part of the problem in our relationship. Right from the start I was myself — not subordinate or adjunct or subsidiary. I was always myself, a self, a being, not made to take orders. And that goes for sexual activities, too. One day, not long after we had first gotten together, I told him, "I'm not always lying underneath! I'll be on top this time." He didn't like that one bit. His response was to pull away and give up on any more action.

That was typical of Adam. He wanted his way.

There was another odd thing about him: the fact that, while he thoroughly enjoyed our sexual acts, he didn't at all like to talk about what we did or how it felt. Before, during, or after wards. He neither wanted to plan nor to reminisce, to re-live the experience. For me, talking about it is gourmet frosting on a well-made pastry. It is even more than that: when the words come, my body flushes into readiness for more.

God the Father had made His first son something of a self-centered prude. At the same time, He gave us both healthy appetites and the vigorous bodies, the means needed to satisfy them. Something of a contradiction, wouldn't you say?

What Adam wanted to take for granted included my submissiveness to him in every way, not just when we were making love. He believed that he, not both of us, was God's surrogate. What he would have liked was to rule our universe alone, without any argument or even discussion about sharing power. That was one reason why he so enjoyed the time he spent with the animals. He felt that they knew he had dominion over them and that they accepted the fact gladly. He only wished that I felt that way, too. After he and Eve were together, he ranked his relationship to his wife and children to maintain that superiority.

I remember what he said to Eve one day when she asked him why God had never spoken to her, only to him.

"There's a social hierarchy in His Grand Scheme," he explained carefully, a superior little smile twisting his lips. "A hierarchy of authority and value. Not everyone in this world is going to have the same social standing. Not everyone is going to get the same privileges."

He didn't get any more explicit than that. At first I was sure she didn't understand what he was talking about. When she didn't ask what her social standing was, I decided that she had guessed. It was certainly lower than Adam's.

Of course, the Holy One has spoken to me. Many times. I'm at least of the same social class Adam was. Perhaps of an even

higher one. Demons are all beings of very high rank. Adam needed to dominate and he wanted a mate, but he was unwilling to accept the fact that these two things don't always go together. Certainly I didn't want a master; I wasn't about to become a slave. Yes, that's what it would have been — slavery. He was unwilling to accept "mateness" as I defined it: an equal partnership.

Always complaining! Both to me and to God. About me.

So what would you expect? I left but, before I did, I picked an apple from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. I was curious and it was there. Adam didn't know about the Tree yet; it hadn't been called to our attention or forbidden to either of us. I gained some knowledge from the fruit, but some I already had. It just sharpened the difference between the two extremes, the difference between right and wrong. You could say that I was already in the process of making my choice and that's why I ate the apple. It did help me to choose. Evil.

When I left Adam, I went to what later became Egypt, to enjoy the Red Sea. And there, to my surprise, my body changed. I grew these wings and fangs and developed a demonic autonomy which I hadn't had before. I became the mothering female, the birthing goddess, and began to produce new creatures from my body. All by myself, some say. (But we know otherwise, don't we? I had some help from you, oh handsome Devil, didn't I? That was where we met.) A hundred of each of the little demons appeared every day, like soap bubbles being blown out of a pipe into the wind.

That brought a reaction from Heaven! Evidently all that reproduction was not a part of His Grand Plan. The Most Holy One sent three angels to persuade me to go home — the same three whose names were used to ward me off from the cradle of baby boys during what Western Civilization has come to call the Middle Ages. The three weren't powerful enough to accomplish what they were sent to do that first time. Why would

anyone give them a second chance, think that they'd succeed later?

No doubt God thought that I was overpopulating the universe — and with the wrong sort of creature. Once He had noticed what was going on and issued His Order, I was willing to accommodate Him; I stopped my reproduction. But even when those angels of His had threatened to destroy one hundred of my demon children if I didn't go, I wasn't willing to return home.

I didn't claim this horde of offspring; they were like drippings of sweat falling from my body. The threat to my children wasn't why I refused. I wouldn't go unless Adam agreed to a change in the terms of our relationship, made it more shared and equal. I couldn't get a divorce; we weren't married. And, anyway, the idea of divorce hadn't occurred to anyone yet.

Neither had the idea of marriage as a mating ritual, for that matter.

You can imagine that Adam got terribly lonely while I was gone, even though he had all the animals in Eden for company. (You remember that he had named those animals and the plants, he and I, both of us together, when we were inventing language.) But he was stubborn; he didn't see the need for change in the way we interacted, the way we played out our roles. He began to fantasize, to dream about how nice it would be to have another, more compliant, woman. One whom he could manage without any stress.

It wasn't long before the Almighty Father — who is not long on patience — gave in. He decided that, if Adam were ever going to be happy, he would have to have a woman who was part of himself. Evidently he needed a creature who shared his identity, his flesh and his belief systems, so he could understand and control her.

He couldn't do either with me.

Well, he got one, and cheaply too, at the cost of only a single rib. Even that was replaced once Eve was formed. It happened

one night while Adam was sleeping, dreaming wet images of a compliant mate. Our God used a birthing technique like the one that a Greek god had used before Him. Zeus had brought his daughter, Athena, from his forehead fully grown and Eve was produced, already adult and nubile, from Adam's side.

I wasn't there; I was still in Egypt. I learned about it anyway. Later.

When I finally heard the whole story — that our Maker had developed Eve from Adam's body — I thought what He had done was a malicious and frivolous improvisation. I thought it was a mark of His own Imperfection as a deity. But after I had mused about it some more, I thought "Fine!" Adam had turned into a worn-out "husband;" he wasn't a good lover any more. I didn't need either his complaints or his orders and there were other ways — as you well know — to satisfy my sexual desires. But I was writing my own story, designing my life, and that wasn't going to be the end of us — of Adam and me.

Even if I had become tired of his nagging, there was still going to be me in the background, despising them, laughing at them both. And controlling their lives.

So I came home.

Beautiful I am and, if I had so chosen, Adam would never have been satisfied by the love of a mortal woman. But God wanted him to populate the earth with humans. I think that He wanted me to abandon the man, leaving him with some desire, some necessary lust, for the female of his species.

So it seemed. And at first, when the thought occurred to me, I was almost willing. But somehow it wasn't that simple. The itch of jealousy began to irritate me. Although I didn't want him or the domestic life that he seemed to think couples had to share, I didn't want to let him go entirely.

Of course, it was worse for Adam. He tried his best to abandon me. Briefly. But he didn't succeed; he couldn't do it. After a short time went by, it became obvious to me that I had nothing to worry about. The plan became clear: he wasn't going

to choose between us. He didn't intend to spend his life only with Eve, even if she were an extension of himself. He wanted us both, Eve and me. But although he wanted us both, he had different roles in mind for each of us. One was for work and one was for play.

You can guess which was for which.

Do you think the Creator had this complication in mind from the beginning? I don't think He was a Master Potter at His wheel. He certainly hadn't produced the perfect mortal. He made other mistakes, too. For instance, why did He give them access to everything in the Garden of Eden except for those two trees? If He'd really wanted to keep the Knowledge of Good and Evil to Himself, He wouldn't have planted the Tree there.

I think that God was suffering from ennui, too. I think He was experimenting, looking for novelty, wanting to see how things would turn out if He just put them in motion and let them drift along on their own. But, in spite of His initial Plan, He couldn't let them go that way for long before He got a yen to interfere some more. As it happened, in a little while He had his joke on me, too — if you can call it that.

Was it an accident that I became the entity I did? The Demon Mother?

But I must get back to my history, the real history of mortal beginnings.

It was soon after I discovered that the Heavenly Father had fulfilled Adam's fantasies and made another woman for him, that I began to plot my revenge. I wasn't just going to disappear and let him get out of my reach entirely, even if, when she first appeared, he wanted it that way. Yes, after Eve came, things were different for a while. The man was infatuated with that ignoramus. How he enjoyed teaching her everything he knew! Or thought he did. Their constant love-making was interrupted only by her endless questions about their world, queries to which he supplied pontifical answers and explanations.

"What are the stars? Can they come closer?"

"Will the sun shine tomorrow?"

"Can I eat whatever I want?"

"Where did the animals come from?"

There was endless curiosity; there were many questions and, delighting in his authority, he answered them all but one: "Why is that owl always sleeping in the tree during the daylight and hooting at us at night?"

That one he ignored, turning his head and changing the subject. He knew that the owl was my night bird, my symbol, and that I was close by whenever it gave its distinctive, hollow cry. He wasn't about to tell her that.

"Will we go on like this forever?"

"How did I get here?"

The last of these questions he answered with magisterial dignity, "I wanted you, and the Almighty wanted to please me. He granted my wish."

She looked at Adam with wonder and absorbed admiration. She thought he knew so much!

One afternoon, lying on her stomach on a low bluff overlooking the still waters of a pond, she caught a glimpse of herself reflected on its surface. Like Narcissus, centuries later, she fell in love with what she saw. Startled, for a little while she hadn't realized whom she was seeing. When she moved her head from side to side and the image followed, she was delighted. She bent over and looked more closely, breathing in the dampness drifting upward.

"Is that really me?" she mused. The image in the water did not respond. Altering the expression of her mouth, widening and narrowing her eyes, she followed the movements in the waters. She played with her hair, re-designed its fall around her face, and examined the effect in the surface reflection. How she enjoyed herself! Yes, it was she. It was herself reflected there. Eve was pleased by this discovery. "I am lovely," she decided.

Well, she was pretty — in a simple, country way. I would have liked to tell her myself that there was nothing extraordi-

nary in her beauty. Hers was the ordinary garden variety of looks, open and serene. I was the seductive one, closed, secret, and complicated.

After that day, she went back over and over again, to admire herself in the water's surface. The way some people in the future came to walk out in the same place every night to see the sun set. To experience an aesthetic element of the natural world. For her, the ritual sprang from a primitive ideology, God's gift of beauty found in her own body, not just in that of her beloved. She was filled with wonder.

Later, she wanted to see whether Adam reacted to her in the flesh the same way that she had responded to her reflection. As eager as he was to touch her, smell her, taste her and enter her — to mix all the senses in the same physical experience — he had never praised her body, never given her compliments. That puzzled her and so she put him to the test. Gazing at the face lying next to her own, she asked, "Am I as beautiful as you are?" He opened his eyes and searched her features.

"Almost." He laughed.

He was trying, I suppose, to be at least partially honest. He added, lightly, "After all, you're a part of me, the Original Creation. I was made in His Perfect Image."

And that seemed to please her. If he were Godlike, then she was, too.

But she knew nothing. Adam knew it all. She was certainly his subordinate, was aware of it, and yet she didn't mind. Because that was the way he, Adam, her husband, liked it.

Physically they were more alike in the Garden of Eden than later. Adam took his body pretty much for granted; Eve didn't. He had no hair on his face then. Her dark tresses fell below her shoulders; his locks ended over his ears. The only hair on their bodies was directly in the pubic area, decorative rather than protective. Neither their body hair nor what was on their heads grew; it stayed the same length all the time. Until they were expelled from the Garden.

As you can tell, I didn't understand why Adam was so interested in her. I didn't appreciate his liking to be with her as much as he was. For a long time I was excluded from their paradise. As if it weren't mine, too! And that was when I decided to tempt them into eating the forbidden fruit, the apples from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The question was how it should be done. Adam was already suspicious of me. He had warned Eve that a stranger might appear who would try to destroy their happiness. I certainly couldn't do my mischief in human form. Or in one of my angelic or demonic ones. But one of my own, proper shapes — one that the Holy One has given me — is that of a snake. So it seemed quite appropriate to disguise myself as a serpent.

Some historians say that I consorted with you before I tempted them. And that I kept the head of a woman on the snake's body while I was coaxing Eve into taking the first bite. Neither is so. As far as I knew, you weren't there and Eve would never have been tempted if I'd appeared that way, as another, unknown female.

Why did I want so badly to get even? In truth, it was only partly Adam's defection. I wanted to see how much power I still had over him. Perhaps none. I wasn't going to begin with Adam, but with Eve. You see, it was mostly Eve's ingenuousness that so attracted me to malice. It drew me to defile it. A simpleton like that, without fault or meanness, begs to be destroyed.

I can tell you that there is no greater pleasure than the corruption of innocence! What is the point in persuading an already wicked soul into doing more of the same? It is much too easy. But enticing the good to betray themselves, teaching them new, intimate knowledge of the world, of others and of themselves, allowing (not forcing them) to encounter and examine their deeper, blacker characteristics and aspects — ah, that brings ecstasy! The ecstasy of power.

But why am I telling you this? You, the Great Tempter, know it as well as I do.

And so, one day, I gave up my nightly pleasures and went out into the never-ending sunshine.

CHAPTER 3

I chose one afternoon after Adam and Eve had copulated in the shade of a river bank. She had awakened from the deep rest of satisfaction and, leaving him sleeping, had wandered off by herself, humming mindlessly as she moved through the meadow grasses. She was hungry and, when she had reached an orchard grove, she started to help herself to the fruit weighing down the branches within her reach. Then she hesitated and turned away.

There, well within her sight at the center of the laden greenery but separate, standing next to the Tree of Life, was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

It, too, provided bright glimpses of ripe fruit — crisp, deeply colored apples — shining through the leaves.

There was no fence around either tree, no barrier, not even an aura to warn her away. Only the invisible admonition "Forbidden!" to make her remember to keep her hands to herself, to satisfy her stomach's calling by means of another source. She

drew closer to the tree, as I had often seen her do in the past, wondering what made this particular pair so precious, so restricted, so endowed with promise and with threat.

In the past that wondering would have been all there was to it. But this time I was there and that made all the difference. It was then that I parted the leaves and slithered down the deep descent of the trunk and up to Eve. Such an animal-lover, so at harmony with her perfect world, she felt no fear at my approach. I was nothing more than a new kind of snake to her, an intriguing one with my broad, flat head and a long skin of intricate, deep purple markings worked with green and banded in gold. (When I took on reptile form, I shunned anything approaching a hard, repellent crust; what I settled on was not florid ornamentation but, just the same, it was loud enough to catch the eye.)

Nor did she seem to feel any surprise at the sight of a serpent introducing itself for an afternoon's conversation. Since all the animals in Eden knew her by name, I began with a friendly, personal greeting.

"Hello, Eve," I said in my softest voice, avoiding the traditional hiss which today still sets human flesh to trembling. "Isn't it a lovely afternoon!" I don't know why I commented on the weather since every day in Eden was lovely. The remark was a forerunner of one of humankind's future habits: the weather as a conversational opener. "How nice to meet you here!"

I was trying to proceed with caution. Only the truly simple can be flattered extravagantly without becoming suspicious. She was quiet, attentive, waiting to see what this stranger would say next. Moving across the grass, closer to her, I raised my serpent's head, swaying back and forth to gaze directly into her eyes. She was listening closely, bending her head to shorten the gap between us as I undulated there. Such a young, empty face! No risk, no danger was waiting there. I was emboldened to go on.

"The zebra told me there was a woman in Eden. I've come a long way from the other side of the Garden just so I could see for myself. I'm glad I did. He said that you were lovely to look at. When I go home, I'll have to tell him it's true. You are."

She smiled a little, modestly, clearly pleased to be praised.

"Hello, Serpent." She knew the name instinctively, thinking as she said it that she was bestowing it on me. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, I'm sure. Have you been here long, waiting? I hope not. I am a little later than usual."

"Not long enough to be discouraged. And I'm getting ample return for my patience," I answered, pushing the flattery a little further.

She smiled again. Then, wanting to reward the one who praised her, she accepted my presence and invited me to stay.

"Are you tired? Coil up and rest for a while before you go on. I'll sing you a song while you relax. That will help us get acquainted. What would you like me to sing about?"

She sounded as if she meant it. The naive woman really believed that the tunes she made up and their words — the first in the mortal world — were valuable. In her mind, she could give a gift with her singing that would cure fatigue, one that would help people to learn to know each other, help them to pare off the jagged edges of disagreement and find contentment.

"Choose whatever you like. I would enjoy any of them, I'm sure. It's true, I *am* tired." It was easy to lie to her. As I was doing it, I wound my slender body into an oval pattern at her feet.

And then she sat down where she was and sang me an artless tune of painful purity, constructing both melody and lyrics as she went, her fresh voice clearing the distance between us with its cloying sweetness and simplicity. I don't remember the exact words now; I do know that they were about love. Happy, fulfilled love, which was all she knew, all she had experienced. Not about unrequited love, or betrayed affections, the way

songs came to be later. Certainly not about bored, worn-out love, the kind I had known with Adam before I went away.

When she paused to catch her breath, to punctuate between verses, I thanked her hastily, hoping that would put an end to the singing. She was getting to me and I resented it. I wanted to tell her the truth, tell her that her words were meaningless, that she didn't know what she was singing about. Since I couldn't do that, I was itching all the more to get on with the nasty business I had planned.

"I'll be all right now," I told her, weaving myself once more in an admiring rhythm, back and forth, back and forth, looping myself in coils in front of her. "Just looking at you refreshes me."

"Would you like a little lunch? Before you start off again, going home? I'm not going travelling, but I would." She laughed at herself, releasing a slight musical ripple into the air. "I'm always hungry. Not starving, but just enough to have a little something."

"Ah, you're looking for a snack, are you? Something healthy and refreshing?"

Instantly, I could feel my eyes gleaming. Now! That was the moment! She had fallen into my trap and all I needed to do was to close it. "You've certainly come to the right place for a treat. While I was waiting for you, I tested the fruit of this tree. It's at its peak."

I undulated in the direction of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, where I had been hidden before her arrival. She was watching, wide-eyed, as I moved.

"Juicy and sweet."

What I said was true. With the sunlight filtering through it, the tree was more golden than gold, its precious load was ready, just ripe for the eating. Beautiful to look at and a fragrant, compelling, invitation. One not to be resisted. Here the Master Craftsman had outdone Himself.

Then I said, slyly, "Let's have some together. I'm hungry, too."

If I had been her, I would have eaten it long before then. Immortality isn't worth having if all that comes with it is unending ennui. But then, if I had been Eve, I wouldn't have been so suffocated with tedium that I really had to have the apple for the sake of a change, a challenge. Obviously, it didn't take much to keep her entertained.

At that point she smiled at me a little more hesitantly. She didn't want to admit that, before she'd met me, she had been fantasizing about how the apples on that particular tree might taste.

"Maybe you can have some. But those apples aren't for us. We mustn't eat them," she said reluctantly. "God the Father won't allow either Adam or me to enjoy them. Or the ones from the Tree of Life. I'll have to look a little farther, to pick some pears or peaches from one of the others."

I knew right then that I had her trapped. She was going to be easy to persuade. Why? Because she hadn't said "eat them;" she had said "enjoy them." There was even a slight tone of resentment in her voice. Her ingenuousness was already fraying; God's prohibition had annoyed her. It didn't seem fair.

What entered my mind at that moment was the thought that the Almighty Power had not improved with practice. His third attempt at designing a human, this young woman, the one supposed to be perfect, had produced a spoiled creature. He had botched the job again. Already she was irritated if she didn't get her own way.

"Why not? They're the tastiest of the crop." I caught myself wanting to add, "There's nothing here to harm you." That might have aroused even this innocent's suspicions. "I've already had one," I assured her. She looked at me uncertainly, wanting to believe, wanting to be convinced. I didn't wait any longer, but wound myself around the trunk of the Tree of the

Knowledge of Good and Evil in a generous loop and started climbing.

She watched, immobilized, fascinated.

Suddenly it seemed as if the growth of the tree where I was encircling it was taking on new life. The branches became stronger, straighter; the bark, deeper and more intricately irregular; the fruit, accessible and brilliant. It was glowing with an inner light. My very presence was corrupting it into a lubricious radiance. Eve drew closer, waiting to see what I was going to do next. That was easy to decide: I went for the largest, brightest apple of the lot, grasped it in my mouth gently — like a well-trained retriever — without breaking the skin, and brought it down close to her. Its fragrance, floating outward, surrounded us both.

Then I bit into the apple, slowly, deliberately, enjoying the crackle of its crisp flesh breaking, the spurt of juice into my mouth.

Sometimes different pleasures of the flesh, deeply felt, elicit the same response as others do. Eve, speechless, dizzy with desire, shut her eyes and moaned almost inaudibly. Her mouth was pursed, contracting with the vicarious taste of the fruit I was chewing in mine. Out of one corner of her lips a few drops of saliva were escaping.

I took another bite of the apple, crushing it slowly and carefully between my jaws. I was ignoring her, pretending not to notice her reaction, and savoring every moment of the experience. The apple was going down, being assimilated, becoming part of me. I was having a good time, relishing the moment, and anticipating what was going to happen next. Beyond a doubt, the drama itself was enhancing the taste of the apple. This had to be the best fruit in the Garden of Eden. A very special one...

I said as much to her.

And what was going through her mind? She was convincing herself that there was nothing to fear but the loss of an extraor-

dinary experience, one she had never had. I was proving that to her, wasn't I? By eating it without injury, without any reaction from on high. Of course, in fact He was just waiting to see how far they — His Creatures — would go. He wasn't going to intervene until the scene was played out. All the way to the end, to the climax.

"Delicious! And just think how much you'll know if you eat one!"

There was no need to say anything else; no need even to say that. Eve didn't care in the slightest about what she'd learn. She was not just perpetually hungry; she was weak. Well, perhaps, if she'd thought about it, she might have had some slight desire for the knowledge of good and evil, too. But, mostly, something else was going on. For the first time in her life, she was jealous of someone who was doing something that she was forbidden to do.

Eve reached for an apple for herself.

After the first bite, nothing could have distracted her. She fell on her knees, concentrating, her round buttocks settling onto her ankles. I had disappeared, was gone, utterly banished from her consciousness. What did I do then? I'm sure you can imagine. The conqueror, as good as invisible, I was pleased to take advantage of her in the most direct way possible. With my penile form, I entered her body easily from the rear, wriggling into her warm, secret recesses. Because of the spell on the apple, on that forbidden fruit, what was going on in her mouth held her as bound as if she were tied. Believe it or not, it was more engrossing than my slippery, unexpected attack. I moved back and forth; she couldn't stop either herself or me.

That was no ordinary apple she was eating.

She didn't even try to defend herself, didn't even acknowledge submission — just ignored me and went on biting into the apple, consuming it. In fact, she was gobbling uncontrollably, forced for a while into indifference toward my invasion. Fo-

cussed in that one direction, her motivation was fixed, unchanging: she was all for that action. All for eating. Nothing more.

You can understand that. Not many people can put their full attention to two physical activities, even such everyday things as rubbing their heads and patting their stomachs at the same time.

I was gloating.

Somehow, for me, her passivity was the best part of the whole experience. It was not the rape or my sexual achievements. It was the meaning of what had happened. It was the growth of my control, the fact that she had lost her freedom of choice, was completely in my power. And, I have to admit, in the power of other forces, ones beyond me. I had not developed that Tree. I was collaborating with the Almighty who had, the Force who had given the Tree the capacity to tempt these mortals to sin. We were partners that day, just as you and I have been many days since, Great Shadow.

What did you say? You were there when all this happened, there watching? I thought that was so. There was a sudden flash of dry heat when she reached for the apple and I thought I smelled sulphur in the air. Somehow I had a feeling you were thereabouts in the background, cheering me on when I was tempting her, rejoicing at my success. I'm sure my trickery pleased you. You would probably have done the same thing if I hadn't thought of it first.

By the time she had finished the apple and I my internal enterprise, the poison both it and I were supplying had gotten to her. She had learned humiliation and pain, become a different woman. Yes, it was so; that was the gift of the apple. She had learned the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Then she began to weep with anger and frustration. Even if her palate were satisfied, her body and her self-esteem were solely wounded. Her pride was shredded. Realizing finally what had happened, what had been done to her, she picked up a stick to injure me.

Nothing could be killed in the Garden of Eden, but she certainly hoped to hurt me.

By that time the Tree had receded to its normal dimensions and texture; it had darkened and the mystic, inner glow was gone. I twisted around its trunk and climbed out of reach to the top, taunting her as I went.

"O thou gluttonous female! You dirty little bitch! Greedy whore!"

Eve didn't understand the words, but she knew that she was being insulted. The flattery was over; outer praise and inner self-confidence had both vanished as the result of a single act. She was in for trouble and right away she knew it. I was glad. I wanted to add a few more wounds to the bruises, rub a little salt into the sores.

So then I finished off the whole scene with a final sally: "Tell your husband I made my own route. I didn't go into his territory..." That she understood. Furious, she took another swipe at me. Arching back, I hissed and hissed. She retreated and the brief battle was over. By that time she knew that she couldn't reach me. She gave up and, at that moment, an idea shone through her feelings of disgrace. I could see it coming.

She picked another apple and, carrying it with her, went to find Adam. She needed a partner in crime, that was her idea, another culprit to share the blame, to spread the guilt and make it thinner. Getting that partner mattered more than getting revenge against me did. Whatever the consequences of disobedience to His Royalness were going to be, she would see to it that she and Adam shared them. They would be in that together, the way they had been the rest of their married lives.

I shed my serpent's body and followed, out of sight, looking forward to seeing the fun.

"Hello, honey," she began when she found Adam. He was yawning and stretching, just beginning to wake up as she sat down beside him. "Did you have a good rest?" Without waiting for an answer, she went on. "I've brought you a present. Look

what I've got!" She opened her palm and instantly the apple began to shine. He knew immediately what she was holding. There was no other fruit like that. Appalled, frightened, he closed his eyes again, hoping the image would go away. She shook his shoulder gently to make him take a better look.

"Taste it," she said, offering the apple to him, reassuring him. "It's all right. I just had one and nothing bad happened. It tastes like nothing else in this world. You'll love it." She was repeating my lines, reciting from the script I'd delivered to her earlier. Surely it is so that misery has loved company, right from the beginning of human life!

"Try it."

And so he did. That was enough. He responded to her sweet imperative, her loving invitation, as if it were not just plain temptation and dangerous. Abandoning his pact with the Holy One, he gave in, ate the fruit straight down and enjoyed it as much as she had. While he was consuming the apple, bite by bite, chunk by chunk, peel and all, everything but the thin stem and the center core with its tiny seeds, she watched him. They shared that enjoyment but, just the same, there was something ominous in the air — some tension — and, as soon as he was finished, the situation had changed. They *both* began to feel more than a little uneasy. It was not indigestion, but their new knowledge — the awareness of sin — that was getting to them.

You have noticed, I'm sure, that Eve didn't tell him about me, the serpent, that I had tempted her. Not right away, anyway. Not until he had eaten his share of the fruit. When she did, he guessed right away who that serpent had been. But even then he didn't discuss the matter with her. In fact, during the rest of their lives together, he never told her that he knew the demon who had outwitted her. Yes, he was angry at me, but even more so at himself. His inviolate, hard-crust self-image had been injured. He felt weak, outdone by an inferior.

Me, an "inferior?" Imagine! You can understand why I had left him.

That episode kept us apart for a while. But not for too long. My erotic lure continued as strong as ever.

In all the years ahead Eve never told him that I had taken her from the rear. She had learned her own vulnerability and with it, secrecy and deception. Important lessons. What she never did learn from either Adam or me was that it was I, Lilith, who had played the part of the serpent. That I was the tempter, the source of their fall from grace and the cause of their expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

For them, that single act of disobedience — the eating of the forbidden fruit — changed the cosmos that the Almighty had created. It grew a second half, became split into pairs of opposites: good and evil, observer and observed. The harmonious whole was forever divided.

There had been no disaster while they were eating. Nothing harmful had occurred, not even the appearance of any omens. But they gained new sight; metaphorically their eyes were opened. In those few minutes they discovered disobedience and shame, their own sin, their own nakedness and that of each other. For the first time, they felt guilty. For the first time, afterwards they covered their genitals with fig leaves and made love in the dark, in secret places where even their friends, the animals, could not see them.

After that, what happened was just what I had been hoping for.

Not much later in the day, without any of the dramatic preliminaries of lightning, thunder or earth and water movement that He was accustomed to using to announce His Presence, God spoke to Adam. He asked him quietly if he had eaten the forbidden fruit. (Notice that He hadn't asked Eve in the interval before she persuaded Adam into repeating her act. He waited until the male — the Head of the Family — had fallen into temptation.) Of course, it was a rhetorical question; He already knew the answer.

Not willing to lie and knowing that there wasn't a chance in Hell of deceiving God anyway, the poor man still tried to find some way to exculpate himself.

"It really is a very small matter, isn't it? I mean, what's an apple or two in the larger scheme of things? There're a lot of them still there. No one will miss those two." It was an empty bluster. God did not reply; He waited, silently.

"Anyway, I'm not to blame. Eve ... Eve made me do it," Adam stammered when the silence had become painful. "She was trying to get me in trouble because *she* had disobeyed You. She thought You'd blame us less if both of us had broken the Law. It's all her fault." Of course, then Eve had to produce a scapegoat, too. That was me, the tempter serpent. That was when Adam guessed who that serpent was, what part I had played.

But the Heavenly Father didn't accept either of their excuses; He didn't let Adam blame Eve or Eve blame me.

"I gave you only one Law, Adam. And along with it, free will and freedom of choice. You have chosen freely to break that Law. Now you will have to take the consequences of that choice."

Although it was a portentous announcement, delivering it in a cosmic whisper He sounded almost petulant. He had set it up. Why do you suppose that He was disappointed by the outcome of His experiment?

Having disobeyed once, if He had left them any time at all in the Garden, they would probably have eaten some fruit from the other forbidden tree, the Tree of Eternal Life, too. If they had, they would have become immortal, beyond the reach of even His Potency. To forestall that, the Most Holy One banished them both immediately, before they could return to the orchard. The edict and the performance following it were a little more showy than His Inquiry and Judgment had been. As soon as they walked off the place, depressed and chastened, wearing the leather garments God had given them to replace

the fig leaves, He placed seraphim and a flaming sword as barriers to the gates of Eden.

Innocence and perfection, paradise and immortality were all lost; there was to be no return. Exiles from infinity, they had entered time and, with that entry, had discovered the relationship between beginning and ending, birth and death.

Once that had happened and they had more or less settled down in their new, imperfect world, I went about reclaiming Adam. When I first re-appeared, he was still feeling humiliated.

"You tricked us, Lilith," he accused me. "You cost us Eden. How could you do that to me?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "How do you know it was me?"

No better answer was needed. If he had had half a grain of sense, a little sensitivity to my needs, he would have known that I was jealous. I had done it to Eve, too, hadn't I? If I had wounded him, it was really to get at his wife. I caressed him in a favorite spot and gave him a *bonne bouche* — a mouthful of sweet berries from my own.

Then all was well.

CHAPTER 4

After that I resumed my arbitrary control over Adam whenever I wanted. He had a real "wife" then, the way he had defined the term: someone he needed, a partner in misery. That was something I had never wanted to be. Nevertheless, in quite a different role, I chose from time to time to provide a little excitement for both of us. After they had to leave the Garden of Eden, life was harder for them. They had to make their own living and he was more grateful for the pleasures he'd taken for granted earlier.

Under these changed circumstances he didn't always feel that he had to be the boss and he wasn't always complaining the way he had been, wanting to have his own way and blaming me for my independence. Once out of Eden, I thought he would like that independence, be glad about it. And he did. He was.

He had found out that he couldn't control the world and that he needed the strength of others. That was true all the time except for once — when he asserted his authority over me and

his power over-rode my own. For me, that once was the most important time of all. It changed my life for many years.

I'll get to that part soon.

I've already said that God had made me more than a woman in my shape and in my capabilities. I was also of another realm and eternal. Like all the Heavenly Bodies, I will not die — not because He made me that way, but because I ate of the Tree of Life in the Garden. But, in spite of that, He gave me some dimensions of human form and human appetites. He gave me a body of flesh for my gratification and that is the way I use it. I enjoy sensation; all my surfaces are aware, latent with possibilities and, when they develop, they are alight — blazing — with fulfillment. I don't need to eat or sleep to stay alive; I do those things for pleasure.

I can't be trapped into feeling love, either. What does it mean, this odd human capacity, "loving?" The emotion is alien to me, although its physical act is not. It was one of God's gifts to me that I knew the diversions of eating and excreting, of sensuality and sex. The joys within the body and on its surfaces.

Of course, there were many ways in which my female body was not as human as Eve's. For example, I didn't menstruate. Menstruation was part of the Almighty Father's revenge on her: Eve's "curse" and that of all the women who came after her. Like the banishment and the pain of childbirth, it was planned as punishment for disobedience. I laughed when I realized what was happening to her, what was going to happen every month until she aged out of reproduction. Or until she became pregnant.

The truth is that I laughed too hard and too soon. My mockery was misplaced. As it turned out, I was more woman than I knew, capable of conceiving and child-bearing myself, not just automatically, easily, producing your demons. That was the joke on me that I referred to earlier. God's joke. A perverted, childish one, I say.

What was it? Now I'll tell you. Once, just once, He gave me the task of bearing a demi-human child. In my own way, of course, not Eve's, but still partially a man-child.

Some months after Eve's menses had stopped and her physical contours were rounding and swelling, I realized that something was beginning to happen within my body, too. Adam's sperm had found a second fertile bed here, in this amorous playground. Changes were taking place that had never appeared when I was carrying your demons. My breasts were becoming fuller and more tender, engorged for the nursing I would never do. Hunger sent his gripping pangs. I began gobbling down everything I encountered in the fields, in the waters, the woods, and the skies. It seemed as if there was never enough for the taking. Inevitably, I put on some lop-sided weight. Above my pelvis — the way that women do. Even with these great, strong wings I had to work hard to keep my balance when I flew.

Can you imagine a pregnant demon silhouetted against a full moon? My load was so awkward that for the last month I was grounded.

You must realize that my pregnancy had some real differences from the way in which female humans carry fetuses to term. One of them was that the blood required to build tissues within my organs came only partly from me. The rest was automatically incorporated into my divine self from the animals I slaughtered and fed on at night. Another was the time needed to complete the inner workings, the manufacture of that new body. What took Eve nine months to produce took me less than three. Then, within two days of each other, both of Adam's sons were born — one of two human parents and one of earth and Otherworld. One through the cervix's bloody passage and one angelically, (or would you say "diabolically?") cleanly outward, straight from the uterus. Without mess or blood.

The Maker of All Things had given me the experience of childbirth, but not as a punishment. There was no pain, no labor, involved.

By the time our babies were born, I was more curious than unhappy about the two pregnancies. How would our children compare? I wondered. Would they be like their mothers or their father? I had no difficulty carrying the developing male, although he grew so rapidly, so actively within me, kicking and shifting as he sized, that I was glad the gestation period was so short.

Up until that time, for me, daily existence had continued much the same. All my appetites, including my sexual ones, had remained; I had always been the initiator of our physical pleasures, Adam's and mine. My very presence was an aphrodisiac for him. But, during his wife's pregnancy, he was not as available as he had been. All those months, before I conceived, Eve had "morning sickness" morning, noon and night. She was not accessible to him sexually. I was. But if he would not force himself on her, he still felt that he ought to be close by to provide comfort. That was a time when he wouldn't take what was offered by me.

Jealousy comes easily to me and neglect has always made me malicious. I began to dream and to plan and soon I had some interesting ideas developing within my mind. I could not make Eve barren (since she had already conceived.) Perhaps I would cause her to miscarry or the child to strangle on the cord *in utero.* Perhaps I would curse her with childbed fever and see that both mother and babe died. Ultimately, when I decided to intervene, it was not while she was "expecting," but afterward.

What did I have in mind? Nothing very complicated, after all. You see, I had no desire to raise a child. I didn't want the one I was carrying if it were going to be dependent on me and there didn't seem to be any way around that. I knew intuitively that this babe was not going to emerge full-grown and independent the way *our* offspring had. What I planned was to

destroy Eve's baby and have her and Adam raise mine, the child of an immortal mother and mortal father. They would get the first changeling the human world would know.

At first I thought that I would just do it by myself, but then I decided to get Adam's help. Why not? I thought I could make him agree. I like to exercise my powers once in a while, wherever they exist, just to prove that they are still there. Yes, the ties were still binding firmly. As it turned out, however, there were more limits than I expected to what the man would do. Even when I pointed out that he wouldn't be losing his firstborn. (I knew that my child would be the first to appear.) He wouldn't end the life of Eve's offspring and, what's more, he wouldn't let me do it, either. Remembering that I had been the serpent who had tempted Eve and caused their exile, he didn't trust me.

Wise man. I laughed aloud when he said that, but just the same I had to think of something else.

The waiting went on and I did think of something else. Or, rather, Adam did because, for the first time, I was playing at being a female human — sulking and refusing to give him access to my body. His sexual appetite was becoming greatly magnified. Eve had wanted no part of him during the full length of her pregnancy and the man was hungrier than ever, his fantasies swelling with the size of our bodies. It seemed to me that I grew enormous overnight. With both of us inaccessible, he would have done almost anything to guarantee a return to our customary affair as soon as the baby was born. *Almost* anything.

It was about midnight when he came to find me where I was lying on the side of a hill, my wings invisible behind me. I was propped on a mossy rock, watching the shooting stars in the brilliant skies above. For me, the greatest repose is found in wilderness, in the desert or the mountains. Grounded, I had been getting restless, longing for flight of my own again. The heavens were pulling me upward and I turned to him reluctantly.

"Lilith," he said, as soon as he had gotten within ear's range. "I've thought a lot about what you suggested." He paused and my heart gave a victorious leap. I thought that he had changed his mind and was going to agree with my proposal. A moment later I knew that wasn't the case.

"I don't see why Eve and I shouldn't raise your child if you want us to. It won't be as though the children would be brought up by an entirely different couple. One of their parents will be the same."

Then I began to understand what he was talking about. He would go along with my trickery just so far, was phrasing the plan in a careful way. He would only allow me to inconvenience Eve a little, so little that she wouldn't even know that injury had ever been done to her.

"If you want to give our child the chance to be raised by Eve and me, I'm willing." By "our," he meant his and mine. "We'll switch the babes, without hurting either of them. You'll still have the pleasure of fooling Eve."

Ah, I thought, a limited pleasure. I will have good material for blackmailing you in the future, but I won't have the joy of having Eve know that I've tricked her. There is another possibility, however. Under those conditions I'll be able to get rid of her offspring later. The one entrusted to me. That idea was consoling.

Unfortunately, Adam knew me too well. Reading my mind, he added firmly, "You only have to agree to look after the other child, to keep him safe and sound for a while. Just to early adulthood, until he or she is capable of taking care of him- or herself." He was making it clear that he would be around to be sure that I didn't make a fatal error.

Not the *carte blanche* I had wanted, but not a bad bargain, all things considered. Perhaps, I thought, the time would come in the future when I could let Eve find out what I had done. Accidents do happen, don't they? (I didn't suggest that to Adam.)

So we came to an agreement. And each of us had a part in the plan. I knew it would never work if Eve found out too soon what had happened. She would probably have rejected my child and gone looking for her own. Adam had to promise me that he would keep the secret, too, and raise the child as if it were hers. For the time being, we both had to see that Eve continued to believe the baby was the legitimate offspring of her union with Adam. That shouldn't be hard to convince her; that was what she wanted to believe. As I said before, people accept the reality they want; it is always one they think they have a right to.

Adam and Eve were sleeping apart then, in separate spaces in the cave, so she didn't know when he came to be with me. She was busy with her great expectations and focused on the babe within, putting up with Adam's necessary daytime absences. She would have been annoyed if she had known about the night-time ones. She was missing him, needing him, wanting the comfort of his closeness but not able to rest with him beside her.

One night, before her pregnancy was far along, I crept into her cave. I didn't plan to hurt her, just to tease. Keeping my distance in the dark, I ran my hand between her legs, rubbed her there and fondled her nipples until she moaned, shaking with excitement. I put my mouth to her body and sucked. She had never known that in Eden. I'm sure she was thinking that Adam had come home and was trying to make up to her. She probably thought that her satisfaction was particularly intense because he was the donor.

But on that occasion I was her mentor, her evocator. I taught her something about her body that she hadn't known: it didn't care who the source of pleasure was, Adam or me or Eve herself. Or any other warm, active creature who knew the nature of her physical workings.

Our sensual game of Blind Man's Bluff could have gone on all night except for the fact that I couldn't help myself: I lost control and laughed. And then it was all over. She realized what

was happening, sat up abruptly and called out, "Begone, incubus!" She didn't know any of the rituals devised later for exorcism, so she started to scream an incantation of her own at me. Needless to say, I fled, uninjured. But not before I had laughed again, mocking her, accepting the name she had given me with her first enraged breath. I cried out, back at her.

"And succubus, too!"

I believe in giving the Devil his due, as the saying goes. (You'd agree with that, wouldn't you?) After all, I was with her husband a lot more than I was with her.

When it came time for Eve to deliver, I had just produced a son already autonomous. He came with strength in his limbs and a will of his own to suckle or refuse the breast, to urinate or defecate, to pinch or stroke when he pleased. From the moment he opened his eyes, he watched the world warily, guarding himself. He was not given to bawling, nor to cooing, either. Nor did he grow into the usual infant whining. Crossbreed that he was, my son was himself from the start.

For me, childbirth had been simple — a quick, magical emission. One moment the babe was inside, protected. The next, he was in the world and I was entirely intact. For Eve, God's curse was already in effect and the hard work involved, coupled with ignorance, brought her pain. While there were no "old granny" tales of how awful it had been for her predecessors, there were also no doctors or midwives, either. No one helping her to do the work involved; nobody telling her what to expect, what was normal and usual for the human body.

Out of sight in the underbrush I watched it all. Just as the child's head was emerging and she giving the final push, Eve fell back, unconscious. It was then that we made the switch and, when she awoke, she cradled the babe she found in her arms where Adam had placed him.

His father named him Cain.

Trapped by my promise, I carried the other infant away. I had no special feelings for him, that small, impotent lump of

flesh. Only distaste and annoyance that I was being held to a commitment I neither wanted nor needed. It was as if some formless beast of the fields had crawled into my life, totally dependent and eliciting shelter, food, and care. What had he done to deserve my help? I needed neither housing nor nutrient for myself; why should I provide them for a stranger, an invader, son of my human rival?

I had no choice. Adam and God both held me to my pledge. From the day of that grandson's birth, the Latter was backing him and His first son — even, in a flashy internal memo, threatening me with annihilation if I cheated on my bargain.

Then came the years of entrapment.

I don't want you to think that I really raised Adam and Eve's child. I only did what I had to in order to keep him alive. By the end of the first year he was feeding himself and growing on his own. I'd have stopped him if I could. He even taught himself what he wanted to know, plugging away to find answers in the natural world, observing everything he met carefully and recording it in his mind for future use.

Sweet and loving, his mother would have called him. Returning kindness for abuse, good words for evil ones. A leader without followers, devoid of power in a world just beginning to be populated with humans. He was an example and a teacher born at a time when there were none to emulate him and none to learn from him. That boy was the precursor of the Jesus yet to come, out of synchronism with the time in which he lived.

Tough luck for him; no tragedy for me. Why should I care?

The truth is that, to me, he was nothing more than a nuisance. I had no negative feelings about him. No anxieties. Nor did I have any positive feelings for him. Certainly no love. For a long time our relationship was entirely static, neutral. I ask you, what need did I have for an example of goodness? I didn't want to model myself after him. I had never wanted to look after him, even to keep him safe; there were always better things to do with my time. As he grew up, I neglected him, hoping that

he would go away, find somewhere else to live, some attachments elsewhere.

The only thing I had to do was to keep the bare bones of my promise: to keep him safe. And to keep him out of Eve's range. She might have recognized her child.

Certainly, as time went on, Eve began to feel alienated from the baby we had brought her, to wonder why he behaved the way he did and to worry about him and about those animals who came in lethal contact with him. Early in life Cain, like me, went out to roam at night. A killer from infancy, he hunted for the fun of it, not to eat his prey but to prove the power he had over them. True to his divine heritage, when the animals lay dead, he poured libations of their blood back into the earth. The ritual came by instinct: no one taught it to him. No one had told him that he was increasing the earth's fertility. For him, ending life — not producing it — was the reason for his living. If he had known about the animal child by my side, he would have hunted him, too. He would have found the truthful, loving creature and destroyed him. For the crude pleasure of using his power.

Except for the danger to myself, I wouldn't have minded at all.

But, as I said, I was compelled by the watchful Almighty to protect the baby until he could care for himself. God isn't called "Almighty" for nothing. "Vengeance is mine saith the Lord" and He has wreaked it with the utmost strength over the centuries whenever and wherever He has chosen. Over those years, I didn't want to call His attention to me, to give Him a reason for trickery. I tried to keep myself inconspicuous.

I wouldn't have called my problem just being "bound by my word." Promises are made to be broken. The trouble was that I had contracted with God, as well as with Adam. At least that was the way they both saw it. And that made the situation much more difficult. He had created me; He could destroy me.

Then Eve was expecting another child.

After their second son was born, I could have predicted Cain's reaction. For him, it wasn't ordinary sibling rivalry. He didn't care whether the boy was his brother or not. He was just another living creature with the potential for getting in the way of Cain's doing what he wanted and having what he wanted. "Respect" and "appreciation" were two words that had no meaning for either of us. I can understand that; he was always more his mother's child than his father's.

I don't like to be confined. Or bested. And I don't like having to thank people for things I'm perfectly capable of doing or getting for myself.

Cain and Abel — he was given that name by his mother — didn't wrestle and play the way the brothers who came afterwards did. They didn't spend any time at all in each other's company. Right from the start, they were different. Abel was close to his mother, frail and gentle, growing up to be a gatherer and eventually a planter of food and a shepherd. He cultivated the fields, too, and praised God both for what he gathered and for abundant harvests.

At first, during the daylight hours Cain picked and dug the wild plants of the field set in among thornbushes and thistles just as his half-brother and father did. But then he became the hunter providing fresh meat for the family. I watched the two boys grow to adolescence together — if you could call it that. Living side by side, they were still not really "together." They didn't act like brothers. They didn't even look like brothers. For one thing, Cain's hair was stringy and knotted, always full of alien bits and pieces from the bushes and tall grasses through which he made his way hunting. It didn't attract his mother's hand the way Abel's silken locks did.

No one would say that those two were alike as two peas in a pod. They were more like a clove of garlic or a thistle brought together with an over-ripe tomato. An accident of errant nature.

Adam favored Cain and, for years, he spoiled him. Until he began to think that he'd gone too far and to be afraid of him. In the beginning he had thought his first son was the masculine one. Unlike Eve, he had refused to worry about Cain's temper, his perpetually sullen face and the pleasure he took in letting blood. Like the boy with whom I was saddled, Eve and her second child were too much of a kind to suit their husband and father. Too soft, too feminine. That was one of many examples of how Adam was developing a stereotypic notion of the difference between the genders.

During all those years that the boys were growing up, Adam paid very little attention to the son I had taken. Except to make sure, from time to time, that he was still around. He didn't include that boy in the definition he had of his role of "father." At first I didn't mind. I didn't want his help at parenting; I didn't need it and I didn't care if the boy did. I never intended to be a conventional parent, neither mother nor father. The child was nothing but a sheddable appendage to me; most of the time it was easy to ignore him.

Humans need role models. Even demons do. But he didn't learn to become what he did from me. That was for sure.

So why did Isaac turn out the way he did? It's hard to explain. Just as hard as it is to understand why Cain, who was half human, turned out the way he did. More demonic than mortal.

CHAPTER 5

For years I watched Adam and Eve living out their family life together. Eavesdropping, you might say, if you wanted to make a joke about it. As far as she was concerned, I came to be more or less taken for granted as a part of the built-in background of their world. A negative part to which she tried to become accustomed. It was a painful struggle and one which she never really won. I never felt sorry for her. Pain is a part of the human condition — one that I, of course, have never had to deal with.

I remember when Adam finally had to tell her about me. It was long before the children started coming. This is what happened:

One full-moon night Eve had left the cave to relieve herself in the usual place in a clearing some distance away. Realizing that Adam was missing, as he often was, she had wandered on by herself, enjoying the play of light and shadow in the luminous meadow around her. She didn't know where her husband

was, but she'd never had more than ordinary reasons to worry: a chase that took longer than usual or a wild vegetable growth found destroyed by other predators so he had to search farther for food. It was a part of his own definition of himself that he didn't always tell her where he was going or when he'd be back, part of what he liked to think was masculine independence.

The darkness was warm and scented and she was daydreaming peaceably as she went, at random, without specific words or images.

Suddenly, an owl hooted close by. It was my owl she heard, my symbol and my pet. Although the sound had become familiar to her, she had never learned its meaning. For the first time in her hearing, the call was being repeated over and over again. It must have seemed ominous to her — a warning. I'm sure her heart was filled with foreboding as she stood still, listening.

Then, from the direction of the bird's cry, out of the tall, shadowed grasses came noise from where we lay, Adam and I — animal grunts, the sounds of demon and human panting in a regular sequence. Transfixed in place, she heard them growing stronger and faster, bursting into what, for us, was an ordinary climax of mutual relief. For a few moments there was silence and, afterward, came murmured words and laughter — not just mine, but Adam's, too.

The hoots of my owl had made me suspect that Eve was there and so my laughter was especially vigorous. Adam may have wondered at the strength of its peals. You see, it had been a long time since I had started wanting her to know that I was with her husband ... nightly. I wanted her to know what he was doing for me, what he was giving me and I to him, how much he wanted me, that he serviced me at my demand and, unlike in the past, in the positions that I chose. Having her there, standing by, shocked into stillness and unable to intervene, increased my sense of triumph.

Soon after I realized that she was there, Eve had recognized what she was hearing. Mixed in with that shock, much of its impact, was the knowledge, the realization, that someone, something in human form, was there with Adam in a world which she had believed they alone shared. The welcoming night had become rejecting. She shivered, turned where she was and fled.

Later, when Adam came home, he settled silently by his wife's side, trying not to disturb her sleep. Since I had been made aware of her presence by my owl's signal, I knew what she had heard on her walk. He didn't. And because that was the case, he had no idea of what was in store, waiting, for him there at home. Eve had been wide awake, motionless, anticipating his arrival, when he came in. Pretending to be asleep when he joined her in bed, she didn't wrap welcoming arms and legs around him in her usual way. Questions and accusations were both put off when, with the ease of a serene conscience and a satisfied body, he turned over and went right to sleep.

He knew that there was nothing new, nothing unusual, about our getting together at night. We'd been doing it ever since Adam's initial infatuation with Eve had worn off. In the beginning, his conscience had troubled him somewhat and he'd worked hard at justifying his deceit to himself. Once he had a reason and a clear-cut statement of rights prepared in his mind, he felt safer and more at ease. Gradually, his guilt lessened and he worried less about being discovered. By the time she caught us *en flagrante*, he'd become careless. We had never before laid together so close to their cave.

It was my idea, of course, but he hadn't objected.

At dawn, while she was preparing their gruel, still in awe of his superior masculinity, still taking a circuitous route, Eve prepared herself to confront him. She wanted him to know what she had found out. Perhaps, relying on his love, she thought that he might be ashamed, that he might try to make things

right between them again. The way they had been, the way she wanted them to be.

"I went out for a walk last night," she began casually enough. Organizing his thoughts, Adam was listening in his usual way, planning the morning tasks and preparing to say grace — to thank God for the goodness of his life. He had no complaints; things were going well for him. His attention was skimming the surface of Eve's words, catching only a part of what she was saying.

"There was that owl again, hooting and hooting in one of the trees. All that noise! It's just too irritating! I wish it slept at night the way we do. Or found another nesting or perch." She sounded cross. That was unusual. Adam's eyes narrowed. She was getting into dangerous territory. Did she suspect that the bird was a sacred symbol, that it was never alone? Had she said her piece? Or was there more to come?

Alas for him, she was only beginning. Reluctantly, he shifted his attention to what she was saying.

"You weren't far away last night, were you? Not hunting or scouting for food. I stumbled on you by accident. You were talking. And laughing," Eve said, abandoning her cautious detour abruptly. She was leaving out what else she knew he had been doing. "But not just you. There was someone else with you." She took a deep breath and went on.

"There are other people on this earth, aren't there." It was a statement, not a query. Flushed with discomfort, she brought her face squarely in front of him, staring upward into his. "Who are they? Why haven't you told me about them?"

When Adam didn't respond immediately, her apprehension quickened.

"Who are they? What's going on? It seems to me that, at the very least, you're being awfully selfish. I could use a little company, too, you know. You're away so much." Queasy, she was retreating, side-stepping the issue of the other woman,

making it sound as if she believed there were more of us than she knew. But the resentment came pouring out just the same.

What else had she heard? What else had she learned? There was no way of knowing. Afraid to be caught at deceit, Adam decided he had better tell her the truth. And so he did.

He told her about his first "marriage," about how it wasn't the real thing. He told her that the Almighty had made a mistake when He designed Lilith — that was her name, he said — because she wasn't a suitable partner for him. Neither in the Garden of Eden nor in the workaday world they lived in now.

Notice that he didn't tell her that I was the serpent who got them evicted from the Garden. She would have been all the angrier.

"She was there, too, was she? In the Garden of Eden when I was so happy, so contented?"

"Yes, she was there. But it didn't matter. Come on, Eve, try to understand! You were the center of my life. You still are. You must know that."

For a moment it sounded as if he were honestly pleading but then, after many repetitions and her lack of response, he went on to the rationale he had so carefully worked out to ease his conscience.

"A man has so much physical energy, so many sexual needs, that one woman isn't enough to satisfy him. That was what the Most Holy One intended; it was all planned. He had His reasons. Good ones. You can't question the way God made him."

"I can't question? Who is this 'him'?" Eve interjected angrily, aroused out of silence. "You're talking about *yourself!*"

"Of course. You know that. What I mean is that I don't deserve your blame," he answered loftily, trying to be patient with her ignorant disapproval. "I'm telling you that that's the way He made me. I'm not at fault. Are you going to quarrel with the Most High Lord? Our Maker?"

Shades of the Fall! Here he was again, wiggling out of censure just as he had after he'd eaten the forbidden apple. It occurred to her that her husband was incapable of taking responsibility for his own actions. Where was this "free will" he had lectured her about? She ignored the implication in his questions and went on.

"Then why didn't He warn me? Or why didn't you tell me before I came upon you two together accidentally like that? You were keeping her secret from me, weren't you?" She began to cry the hot, hard tears of anger, wiping them away with both hands. The gruel was forgotten. She felt betrayed. "You're both cheats! *Both* of you!"

I didn't know whether that "both" referred to Adam and the Almighty or to Adam and me.

In spite of all his preparation, when it happened, he didn't like having his secrecy exposed or being blamed for it. He tried to change the subject, to soothe her, but she was too upset to be willing to listen, especially since, in her view, his concern for himself came out as indifference to her. That was the way she saw it because, in the end, he wasn't giving up any of what he considered to be his rights — which included the right to be with me. Wrapping himself in his self-defined masculinity, Adam insisted that all those rights were God-given marks of status, dimensions of the hierarchy of rank he had told her about earlier. He had his privileges just as she had hers. As he talked, he became more and more convinced of the correctness of his argument.

She became more and more dismayed.

He did tell her that he loved her, but the battle wasn't over. Later, as he got hotter under the skin, he followed the statement up by saying that no one, especially not a little female made from his rib and designed to be his subordinate, could deprive him of those rights. They went with his gender and his assigned social role: first human and potential patriarch. She wasn't

supposed to remember that he hadn't produced any young as yet.

"Remember your place, woman!" he thundered, ultimately confusing himself with God the Father, the Creator, the Ruler of all the Universes. No lightning had flashed; the sunny skies remained undisturbed.

Invisible, fluttering in the air on the sidelines as I was, I was enjoying the soap opera. But it was more than Eve could take. Her response was straightforward. The crying faucet was turned off and, locking her hands together tightly, she spoke with dry heat:

"All right, then. If all you care about is your own privileges, if that's all I am to you, get out! I don't want to love you! I don't want to want you any more! I won't have anything to do with you. Go be with her. I don't care."

"I don't care," she repeated.

I didn't believe it and neither did Adam, but, in truth, for the moment she had stopped caring. For the first time in her life Eve had made her own decision and asserted herself against his will. Indeed, it happened: she kicked him out. She wasn't faking when she told him to go find himself another cave, that she was going to live alone, without him — on what she could gather for herself in the fields, catch in the waters or find in the woods. Life would be harder, but she would be more content, no longer suspicious, feeling neglected or deceived.

Adam tried to talk her out of it, softening his command and reminding her of of her origin and some of the good times they had shared.

"We were made for each other."

He still didn't believe that she meant what she was saying, but she did. Finally, when she stayed steadfast as night following day, he tried to scare her. He accused her of being a disobedient wife and told her more strongly what he had hinted at earlier: that the Almighty Holy One would punish her.

"I don't care." She repeated the words once more, defiantly, staring at him with her inflamed, angry eyes. "I'll take that risk. He may have created you, but He made me, too. I'm just as much His Child as you are. Maybe He's listening now. Maybe He understands my point of view."

Adam was shocked. He had never thought of her that way, as his equal, his peer, or as the child of God in quite the same way that he thought himself to be. His image of God's relationship to her was more akin to that of the shepherd to his flock than father to child. The sheep were sheltered and cared for but not for altruistic reasons. Their destiny was the production of sheared wool, bone and mutton, and more sheep.

"I'll take the consequences if I have to."

Her self had consolidated, grown strong. She was no longer either *just* his wife or *just* God's child. She was her own person, too.

An unexpected improvement, don't you think? I couldn't help admiring the change. But it was a temporary one.

So, very shortly, he left. He had to. But he wasn't gone for too long as human time is reckoned: only a little over a year. And long before that, Eve had relented and was ready for his return. Just as I had thought she was in the past, she was still a silly, loving creature. When she was alone, she had no one but tamed animals to spend her affection on. She wanted someone to talk to who could respond with words, as well as affection. Adam wanted her back, too. He missed her and, besides, in her absence he realized how much he needed her.

I didn't fill the gap in his life that was caused by that absence. I was certainly not going to waste my time helping him with the daily chores of ordinary life. I was with him for entertainment, for amusement only. Not work.

But, more than their renewed longing for each other, it was the Holy One who got them together again. He had rather admired Eve's show of character, just as I had. After they parted, for a while He left them alone to see if they could manage to

run their lives without interference or direction. Of course, He came to the conclusion that they couldn't. They were stalemated. More than that, they had forgotten the purpose for which He had created them: to populate the earth. They couldn't do that when they were rarely as close as shouting distance of each other.

God delivered His Order to Adam in His usual dramatic way: during the dark of the moon and in a thunderous storm of wind and lightning. The Almighty has always believed that He makes His deepest impression through sound and light effects. Though he claimed to love his Maker, Adam was terrified of Him, especially when He made His Presence known in this direct manner. God spoke from the heart of the storm, repeating the rhetoric He had used since creating Adam.

"I am the Lord thy God, Maker of Heaven and Earth! Thou shalt worship no other God than Me..."

For Him, to worship meant to obey. The fact is that He wanted more worshippers than the two He had. Tired of creation, He wanted them to stick to the task assigned and do the job for Him. "Enough of this self-indulgence," He was saying. "Get on with it! Breed and populate the earth!"

Obedient children, Adam and Eve went back to living together and sleeping together, but their sexual life was never the same. Sometimes Adam took home new techniques we had tried out with each other. While in the past Eve had loved experimentation, now she was suspicious of its source. If the idea came from me, she didn't want it. She would stick to the old ways, she insisted, the tried-and-true pleasures she believed she and Adam had found together, in the beginning before the knowledge of my presence had contaminated her world.

During the year after Adam's return, Eve never knew where I was unless I chose to make myself visible to her, to move something in the space around her, or to whisper temptations that lingered like a breeze caught in her ear. I was an anti-con-

science, a Devil's Advocate, trying her, testing to see whether her moral strength was real and would hold out.

With Adam, there were no complications. I knew the man. He had his kind, considerate side, too, but until he grew much older he was basically an arrogant soul who did whatever he chose to do. He had already proven that he was enough of a hypocrite that he could persuade himself that whatever he did was right, no matter how flagrantly mean or negative it was.

Not that he did anything big that was wrong or evil, just small, selfish things. Just human things. The Almighty wouldn't have let him get away with anything much; He wasn't about to let another Lucifer or Lilith develop. We are unique and He has kept us that way.

Eve was different from her husband. Though by this time Adam's instinct for everyday goodness had been eroded, hers had not. She was made of whole cloth, cleanly woven and clearly designed. He was not. That was part of what attracted me to him in the first place, why I kept going back to him. And why I've been attracted to you. Seamless goodness is a bore.

After they were back together again, there were some times when I felt Eve's presence near me when I was alone and in human form. I thought that she was trying to contact me in some way, for some purpose of her own. Perhaps it was to try to persuade me to leave Adam alone. Or perhaps it was simply to find out what sort of creature I was. There were no other females to compare herself with. Humans are more curious than cats, partly to protect themselves and partly just out of nosiness.

When she finally realized that Adam wouldn't abandon me, wouldn't give me up any more than he would her, she had resigned herself to numbness. For a while, she deliberately cultivated indifference; it spared her pain. She pretended and the pretense became real.

Eventually she was so at ease with our *ménage-à-trois* that, if he hadn't returned, it would have been days before she missed

him. She built a life of her own and gave up searching, waiting, and watching. Besides, soon she had others to think about, others to watch out for: her children. First of all, there was Cain.

My son, whom Eve thought was her own first-born, was more of a watcher than a participant in family activities. Before he decided to live alone, Cain was already keeping himself apart from the others. He was separate by nature, distinctly himself in the midst of the family group. Even as an infant he was his own person. He looked straight back into the eyes of anyone glancing at him, held their gaze until he chose to release it and let them go. Eve found this trait uncanny in a babe-in-arms.

There were other disconcerting symptoms of his uniqueness, too. Born with four incisors already in place, right from the start he used them for chewing flesh. It wasn't that he was given meat so early. What he did was bite Eve's breast after he had finished suckling. Oh, he never made her bleed; he just bruised her. It was his way of showing his resentment at being dependent.

When she pulled him away, he was smiling.

Ashamed of herself for doing it, she put off his feedings as long as she could and ended them before he was completely satiated. Soon there was a psychological tug-of-war between them, each trying to outguess the other as to when they could make their move and foil the other. That's how clever my son was, right from the start. Still a baby, but only in outward form.

Eve avoided holding him; she even resisted picking him up. Soon she was making up excuses about other jobs she had to do first, before she could nurse him, or suddenly remembering ones that she had to finish up while he was still sucking. Nursing him had turned out to be a painful task, not at all what she had expected. But she couldn't refuse him completely; he would have starved. She wouldn't be responsible for that. The bond she imagined between them was too strong. (You know, you and I, that she had made that bond up, just the way she had made up her indifference toward Adam, and it, too, had become real.)

My son never cried for his food the way completely human babies do; he took it for granted, just waited. He needed the milk, but she needed to be milked, or to express it. So, in the end, the delays were harder on her than they were on him.

As soon as he could crawl, Cain found pieces of meat, wherever they were left, to chew into disintegration. They were his pacifiers, keeping him quiet and busy while his mother worked. Eve caught on quickly; she hid them in out-of-the way places to give him something to do that would keep him occupied.

Long before he spoke, Cain was fearless, unafraid of any animal, of any natural or supernatural force. He was always testing his body's reaction to novelty or stress. Put to work to supplement the family's resources, he gathered wild fruits and vegetables. As the years went by and he grew up, he roamed farther and farther afield to find them, traveling alone into unknown territory. He brought back the growing edibles he was sent for, but early in childhood his greatest pleasure became hunting. Hunting because it brought him the raw meat he loved, but for other reasons, too: the chance for solitude and the opportunity to test himself.

Eventually he became a trapper. He put his imagination to devising means of capturing and holding animals of all sorts, sizes and shapes, from all the dimensions of the environment: water, earth, and sky. Creatures from each of these domains had their own nature — their own habits and their own limitations — which Cain, with his persistence, could probe, learn, exploit and destroy at will.

There is no living thing without some weakness or vulnerability. But sometimes it takes motivation and personal strength, as well as time, to develop the skills to find these weaknesses.

Both physically and temperamentally, Cain was strong and he put that quality to work for him. He always enjoyed proving his skills, especially when he was testing them against various antagonists. He practiced these ways of manipulating the world

by himself at the same time that he refused to master what his mother thought he should know, what she tried to teach him herself. When he took knowledge or ideas from his father, in the course of their brief life together, he shaped it to make what he had learned appear as if he had been the teacher and his father, his pupil.

Cain was a clever one and I was proud of producing him. Even if I had no right to contact him, I enjoyed watching him grow up and develop into a force with which others had to reckon. Without any responsibilities attached to it, the process of observing him provided me with continual pleasure.

It was a part of our bargain — Adam's and mine — that Cain shouldn't know any more than Eve did that he was my son. Did he know that the woman, the partner whom God had first given his father, had become a demon lover? A mistress from another sphere? I don't know. As he grew up, Adam and Eve didn't talk about me any more. Both of them began to take me for granted. I stayed out of sight and, if Cain dreamed that I existed, the half-boy never got the chance to test his fantasies.

I kept an eye on him all the time, however, just as I did Adam and Eve. Mostly out of their sight and hearing. There was only one instance throughout those years when my son and I actually encountered each other. It happened when I was visible, in mortal form, having a swim after dark. I knew we were bound to meet sometime, but I hadn't planned it that way. I had been bathing in the river, moving close to the falls and out into the smooth, clean width of the lake. Making use of these wings the way that penguins do theirs, I was flying, invisible under water. Emergent, rising up above the surface, I was caught in a breezy propulsion, pulled up and up over the woods.

As I drifted back to earth, words and the noises of human activity rose from a clearing beneath me.

"Out of the gut! Into the heart ..."

Cain was there in front of a small wood fire, talking to himself and to the beast he was holding to the ground. He was eviscer-

ating it with a sharp stone, cleanly, slowly, enjoying himself and his skill.

My great owl circled overhead, diving and drifting, but I stood still, my wings folded behind me once I had landed, watching until the bloody process was over. Then my son raised his head, saw me there immobile and involved, and smiled. It was a slow smile — proud, guileful, self-satisfied. It reminded me of how he used to smile after he had bitten his nurse's breast. Nothing about it suggested that he was asking for approval or even recognition; he was only acknowledging the experience we were sharing. And that we were sharing it.

In a few minutes, when he had finished his task, he offered me the skin. It was limp, soft. Still warm. I took it as a gift of mutual recognition. Then I disappeared, but not without showing him my true self, my essence: wings and all, fire raging in great symphonic chords from the navel down. It must have been a stunning spectacle against the blackness of the night. It would have been for Adam or for Eve. But he was not stunned, not terrified, not even slightly afraid. My brave just continued to kneel on the ground, still and absorbed, observing me, showing no sign of panic, or even of wonder.

CHAPTER 6

Since the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, except for ordering Adam and Eve to get back together again after they had separated, God had stopped talking directly to Adam. The couple was doing what they were supposed to be doing, populating the earth, and He had other things on His Mind. As the two older boys grew up and other children came along, the mortal father noticed His Silence and began to worry about his relationship with the Almighty. For some years after he and Eve had been evicted from paradise, he had kept his attention on the mundane world with its endless problems, many truly critical such as survival: food and safety.

He had tried not to think of the past or the cause of his altered circumstances.

At first, he had coped with God's serving of sin and his sense of guilt by enmeshing himself in work, trying to find ways to control an environment in which the animals and vegetation were no longer guaranteed available, friendly and healthy.

Outside the Garden everything, even the weather and the quality of the terrain, was unpredictable. In time, timid about addressing an omnipotent, punishing God directly, Adam began to pray daily, quietly, to himself and to the unseen Listener. He even bowed his head to show his willingness to humble himself before Authority.

Yes, it was Adam who initiated the idea of closing the eyes and bending the head obsequiously when addressing the Lord. I don't do that and you certainly wouldn't. Many worshipers take that slavish pose now. For Adam, it was right in keeping with the rest of his attempts to humble himself before His Greatness. At that time Adam wasn't asking for forgiveness, for absolution from sin. He didn't believe he could get it and he wasn't taking any more chances. Being a pragmatist, he did what he thought would work best: he praised.

"O Glorious Father!"

"Beneficent Almighty! Bounteous Giver and Helper!"

"Strength of All Ages, Founder of the Universe!"

"Merciful Omnipotence! O Rock, Fortress and Might!"

"Sovereign Lord! Heavenly King!"

All the titles he made up were accompanied by capital letters and exclamation marks. You could hear them in his voice. Every day he dreamed up more flattering titles, more comprehensive ones. A flood of ceaseless praise intended to sweep away the displeasure of the past, the litany was extravagant and endless. There was nothing subtle about the way he went at it. Once he even went so far as to call Him "Lord of Heaven and Hell." Imagine! Did he really think that you weren't in charge here anymore? I can't believe it.

I would have been ashamed of trying anything as obvious as that. As I said, it was all so self-denigrating, so degrading. So humiliating.

When Adam began to feel a little more confident, he increased the volume and length of his prayers — both their noise level and their duration. Gradually, he added other elements to

his lists of praise. In appropriate order, he asked forgiveness for wrongdoing and help in accomplishing some of the many things that he had to cope with in that unpredictable world. After a while, he told me, Adam began to hear a still, small voice within himself, offering direct guidance without his having asked for it. He sensed that he was getting unsolicited advice, that the Almighty had moved in, that He was attending to him without being beseeched to do so. Rejoicing at the change, he was more than willing to take what help was being made accessible.

He began to meditate quietly to himself, rather than to address the heavens directly. One day he gave a silent prayer just before he went out to gather wild rice, and that inner voice led him to a large-grained crop. It took him half the usual time to gather and, when he emerged from the field, circling breezes warmed him and dried the rice more rapidly than he remembered their doing before. On another excursion, after he had finished his daily meditation, he found an unprotected nest of fresh eggs still intact, it seemed, especially there for his discovery.

It was only a few days later that he stumbled into a hornets' nest. The possibilities for hurt were great but he was stung only three times by the swarm that chased him, zoomed in on him. As soon as he had reached a safe area and applied a mud pack to his wounds, he fell to his knees. Reverting to old habits, addressing the heavens with face turned aloft, he cried aloud his profound thanks:

"O, Blessed Lord! How can I repay Your Goodness? Command and I will do Your Bidding. Ask and it shall be given."

He considered his escape a direct Act of God, a Divine Intervention. There was no doubt in his mind that it was a willful Act, a Fatherly Deed, of *his* God, *his* Great Protector.

The Power that he was addressing was less potent for the rest of the family. Especially for Cain. You'll see.

After that, Adam began to organize and schedule his religious contacts, and those of the other family members, with the Deity. He began with a special prayer of gratitude which he repeated aloud when the family gathered at each meal, before the lot of them began eating. The other children bowed their heads obediently and endured the waiting patiently, but he kept it simple and short to avoid Cain's rebellion:

"Blessed be Your Name!"

"Blessed be Your Gracious Gifts of Food and Strength and Health!" Even then, almost before he had inhaled another breath, his oldest son's arm was on its way to the food. Although it had grown old fast for Cain and he ignored the ritual as much as he could, that first little "Thank You," that first grace, was never monotonous to Adam. He said it over and over again, with slight variation and always with a sense of its sacred freshness, relevance, and appropriateness.

None of us knew how the Great Holy One reacted to the grace. He didn't respond publicly. Myself, I thought the "Thank you" was both unnecessary and simple-minded. Perhaps He did, too. Or perhaps He enjoyed its repetition, took it as a tribute increasing in value each time it was said — like acts of kindness, done over and over again, no matter how dull. In that case it would have multiplied beyond recognition. None of us knew.

That was another ritual that Adam started, wasn't it?

Then one day the first man went beyond his usual territory, exploring a woodland area unknown to him. He came out of the sunshine onto what looked like a dark, cold hollow flushed with leaves and small branches, an otherwise empty space as far as he could see, one abandoned by wildlife. Listening carefully, he stepped into the cave, inside the moss hangings obscuring the entrance and paused for a moment. There was a strange sense of expectation in the place. As he stood there in the silent darkness, all around him the granite rocks were expanding,

becoming huge, beginning to heave. Something was there, waiting, waiting, expecting his arrival.

Was it you? Or one of your cohorts?

Ah, I thought as much!

Unknowing, uneasy, Adam felt the pull of whatever it was in the passage. He began to move, to make his way slowly and tentatively far from the the sunlit entrance, along the damp walls serving as guide, and up a rough path.

There were no other sounds of movement, only the imagined rustle of light animal touch, only the echo of his own heavy breathing and the crush of his sandals on pebbles, sand and, now and then, on the thin soil under foot as he climbed.

Something was there; some force was pulling him onward.

"That's far enough!"

I thought I was shouting those words, but I wasn't. They weren't even whispered, only caught in my throat as I watched. Mute and immobile, I was fixed in place, too curious to move or speak until I saw what was going to happen next. Anyway, shouting wouldn't have done any good. No one can hear me when I'm invisible. It had never mattered before. I had never wanted Adam to know when I kept myself close by, out of sight. I had never needed to speak to him when he couldn't see me.

But he had gone more than *far* enough. Too far. I could see the end of the passage where he couldn't, where the rock abruptly stopped, the cave became precipice. Powered by curiosity — the tantalizing, treacherous pull of the unknown — his measured momentum carried him on, out into the void. Not quite careful enough while placing an invisible foot, in one unsteady second he slipped on moisture leaking from the cracked walls. Then he was gone, downward, out of sight and into the emptiness below.

I caught my breath. There was no time for a prayer then; his falling body was his petition. Echoing over and over against compacted stone, multiplying in flight, spontaneous shrieks resounded as he fell. Some of them were mine, I think. It was

all so unexpected. Down, down, down he went, passing tiny streams of light where the sun cracked through huge, loose boulders.

Did I want to catch him? I can't answer that. However momentary, I think the impulse was there. I'm not sure. Could I have caught him, you ask? No, there wasn't room enough to expand my wings. But, as it turned out, that didn't matter. The plummet was well-ended.

Waiting, at the bottom of the cave, was the ancient spring-fed lake whose reverberating sounds, drifting upward, had drawn him into inquiry. There he landed, in the deep, clear waters, with no more injury than gut-grabbing fear and the shock of resistant contact. Dazed and inefficiently circling, panting, half-conscious, swallowing water as he struggled, he swam slowly ashore and crawled onto the sand to stretch out and rest.

And there, once safe, under the revealing glass of relief, his religious verve was magnified. He re-found his God, his relationship to the Infinite.

Like Paul — the founder of the Christian church — who, traveling to Damascus many years later, encountered the Almighty on the way, Adam experienced a gratifying insight. That his life had been saved miraculously was a Heavenly Sign. Its meaning was as clear as the hidden lake's waters: he had been called to the service of the Lord and he would answer. That answer would be his life's work. The path would be no less difficult than the one he had already been taking, but it would be less narrow, the footing steadier and better marked, than the way he had travelled in the past.

What had he been called to do? To found an institution devoted to the worship of the Lord on High. A temple, a church, a religion — that is, a "tying together" of all that was ineffable and holy. But it was to be a social structure with foundations, supports and byways of enduring architectural design. He would be the builder of the temple; he who had

broken the Law would become its developer, its interpreter, its keeper.

Later, when he was home and dry, he explained it to Eve, telling her how he saw himself in a grand new role. A blessed one. Besides being the First Man, he would be the First Rabbi — the first teacher of religion — and the First Pontiff — the first head of a religious state.

"Sometimes the wrong track has to be taken in order to reveal itself as wrong. The Fall is all in the past now. I've found the way to redeem myself in God's eyes."

He was still excluding Eve. Moreover, it didn't occur to him that his plan was limited in other ways, too — that, aeons later, others would have the same idea and do a better job of it.

As founder and elder, Adam decided, he would institute sacrament, custom and rite; initiates would learn them and perpetuate them. Generation after generation of worshippers would follow, modifying their religious practices, developing them into sects and preserving them long after the first family was gone. Until the end of time. Eve listened closely. To her, her husband's plans were terribly impressive. (As they were to him, too, you have to understand.) They moved her deeply, touching her sensitive soul with the possibility of human generosity and joy through shared belief. Adam was promising worshipful interaction with the Eternal — for everyone yet to come. She hadn't yet realized how these plans were going to change all their lives.

Those changes were real, immediate, and extensive.

From that day on, the task of providing for the household needs came to rest almost entirely on the first two sons and on Eve. That was the way it had to be since Adam had become the Almighty's mediator and interpreter. He started by devising ritual prayers, then went on to history (a brief one — that was all he knew), revelations and sermons, psalms and, eventually, hymns. Content, absorbed, he spent the racing hours working on his scripts for worship. When he was reasonably satisfied

with one, he memorized it by reciting it aloud again and again as he walked back and forth in the cave or its environs.

"Would you mind very much doing that out of my hearing?"

Eve said it politely, but she meant it. She found so much repetition hard to take. I could understand that. Myself, I'd have banished him much earlier and much more strongly.

It wasn't that way for Adam. Historian, prophet, poet, cantor and choirmaster, he was playwright, actor and, eventually, director, too. All of these roles. In due course, as his scripts matured, he drafted his family members to participate as *dramatis personae* in the ceremonies he was initiating.

Needless to say, he didn't ask me. I would not have been interested. For me, what is repeated too often becomes routine, not ritual. Its meaning loses its sharpness — first blunted, then lost. I watched a few times, though, marveling at the trust he was putting into these procedures. Could he possibly believe that the Holy One, with His Endless Work Schedule of ruling all the universes, would attend to this patterned, repetitious nonsense? Ignoring my comments, he went on enthusiastically.

Eve and Abel were willing co-workers. So were the younger children. But Cain was no more involved than I was, even when his father insisted that he join in. There were no apologetic hands covering his yawning mouth.

Soon Adam decided that he needed a physical base for these ceremonies, some sort of temple that was more than the natural setting. He set about building an altar, enlisting his sons' help in lugging great hunks of stone into the center of a meadow and piling them together. They were building a monument to God which they believed would stand, like the new church rites, forever.

It was then that Cain invented the lever to ease the strain of carrying the boulders on their backs or in their arms. It was about that time, too, that he made the first slingshot from a narrow piece of dried cow gut and began to use it to prevent fleeing animals from escaping. Twirling it rapidly in the air

before he flung it, he practiced on anything that moved. He practiced so much that he killed more than the family could eat before the flesh rotted.

Sometimes he only stunned the large beasts when the stone he flung was too small, but that didn't deter him. What he enjoyed was the game, developing his skill. After the animals had fallen, he killed them by other means. A fascination with death was built into his nature.

"I'll make the surface of the altar as smooth as possible," Adam told Eve. "So we can leave offerings here."

Covering the ground of worship as thoroughly as possible, he sought to reward and placate the Almighty Lord in more tangible ways than just words or song. What sort of bribery he had in mind I'm not sure even he knew. Certainly, part of what he was trying to do was to ornament the rituals he was instituting by every means he could: by sight, by sound, by smell, and by taste.

Standing before the stone altar on which Adam had placed a still-hot portion of the meal Eve had cooked, the family group sang the songs their father and husband had composed. They repeated in chorus the lines of tribute he had created. It was Eve's idea to pick sweet-smelling blossoms and strew them on the broad surface, Abel's to bring fruit to share with the Force that had provided it.

Although it pained him to do it, in obedience to his father, Abel even brought one of the firstlings of his flock to honor the Deity. Adam had decided that the greatest gift of all was to sacrifice what was loved. (Time, energy, praise and prayer were his own sacrifices. He was giving his own well-loved self. No problem with self-esteem there!) Seeing his son unable to do it, placing the animal there on the altar so reluctantly, he slaughtered the lamb himself. He did it, he said, to teach the young man a lesson.

When its warm blood flowed over the rough stone, Abel looked mournfully away, gagging quietly to himself. What, he

wondered, could the Almighty find to enjoy in the sensory experience of this offering? The death of this infant? He would never have slain this lamb, never eaten it. It had been his pet, his child. If Adam had turned toward his son at that moment, he would have seen the steel of hatred in his eyes.

As might have been expected, although he had to help build it, the oldest child had his own reaction to the erection in the meadow. Once it was completed, Cain went out of his way to avoid the place. When his father insisted that he participate in the religious ceremonies and bring live offerings, he made a mockery of obedience.

"That's right," he said, with a short, sour laugh. "We're carnivores as well as herbivores, aren't we? Let us prey."

He could have brought any of the corpses of the animals he killed for sport, but no, he wanted to register his disapproval at his father's order more strongly. The first offering he left was the stinking carcass of an inedible, tough old boar he had slain some days before and left lying where it fell. Why waste good meat? he smirked as he laid it on the altar. He isn't going to eat it. Later, after Abel had given up his lamb, he brought a bundled batch of half-eaten roots he had found invaded by worms.

"Do you want me to bring meat, father? Here's meat..."

Adam was not pleased with any of Cain's offerings but, by then, when Cain was fully grown, he had almost given up correcting his independent son. He was so easily intimidated, the man made me scornful. But, of course, I wouldn't have scolded Cain; I would have praised him for his actions. He was right. Whatever any of them left on the altar, the Almighty wasn't going to eat it. Why waste a good kill?

CHAPTER 7

Unlike Adam, God the Father was not intimidated by Cain. He broke his silence that day, directing Himself to Abel. In the hearing of the whole family, from the youngest daughter, still a baby, to the oldest son, He thanked him for the great sacrifice that he had made in giving up his beloved lamb. He acknowledged the gifts that Eve and Adam had brought, too, but He said nothing to Cain.

He wouldn't have cared if both of them had been ignored, but when Cain heard that Voice acknowledging his brother's gift and praising his generosity, the thin green shafts of jealousy within his chest ballooned into a suffocating rage.

"You see," he sneered, turning to his earthly father who was standing beside him. "Your Holiness plays favorites. He's not about to thank me for my offerings."

Adam looked at the young man without speaking. He knew the will with which Cain's gifts had been offered. There was a deep, prolonged hush. The son's eyes never shifted from his

father's face; it was Adam who turned away. And then the Almighty broke the silence. He spoke to Cain, acknowledging him not in gratitude but, instead, with a rebuke, telling him that what he had brought for the Eternal Being was neither a present nor tribute.

"Why are you wroth, Cain?" He waited for an answer. There was none forthcoming. His body tightening, Cain did not lift his head. He stared hard at the ground between his feet. Even he knew the Power he was defying; he had good reason not to offend.

"Why are you wroth?" God repeated. "Am I unfair? Am I unjust?"

His voice was stern.

"If you do well and you give willingly, your gift will be accepted and you will be praised. Have you earned praise?

"Look within. Is your heart pure? Have you given with generosity? With love? Or with the desire to worship?"

As usual, the Lord God of Hosts was asking rhetorical questions.

My son wasn't about to admit that he had earned the admonition, not praise; a scolding, not kind words. These questions were not calculated to assuage the jealousy and anger he felt toward his brother. He resented the comparison. Abruptly, he turned away from the gathering around the new altar and stalked into the fields, alone. God said no more and it was some time before those left behind spoke to each other. They were waiting. What would happen next? Was the discussion truly closed?

When it appeared to be so and his son did not return, Adam improvised a prayer beseeching understanding and aid for all the members of the sole family on earth, help especially for the one who was most in need at that time. He didn't mention Cain by name but all who heard knew who he was talking about.

I understood Cain's actions, but Abel didn't. Not anymore than he ever had. Since they had nothing in common and,

indeed, were barely acquaintances, certainly not friends, he made no attempt to go after his brother to soothe his feelings. He was more interested in doing what he thought his parents would like him to do than in looking after Cain. Always the good son, "Mama's Boy," Abel stayed with his father and mother until the services were ended, the last prayer recited. Then he, too, went about the usual business of the day. But when evening came, it was only the older brother who returned.

I saw it all. This is what happened.

As he did every day, Abel had taken his sheep out to graze on hillside pasture. Under the afternoon sun, he was shepherding the flock across a stream at the far edge of a meadow when Cain rose up from the ground. Brooding and vengeful, the brother had been waiting, hiding behind a flowering, aromatic bush. He had been picking up stones and weighing them speculatively in each hand, fitting them into his leather slingshot and taking them out again and again. Then he stacked them in piles around the spot where he was sitting.

"What makes him think he's better than I am?"

In reality, of course, it was the Almighty, not Abel, who thought one son better-behaved than the other. But that doesn't mean He should have treated Cain the way He had, scolded him in front of his parents. Cain was entitled to do what he did. Each does what he does according to his own nature. Personally, I have always preferred provoking fear to having respect, but he was right to resent the fact that he hadn't been shown the latter. Anyone would have reacted that way.

None of us could make the Deity afraid; we all know that. But the brother next to him in age was another matter. Abel was a logical substitute for the Untouchable, the Unreachable. He was an available surrogate who could be frightened out of his skin. More than that, he could be hurt, wounded, even unto death.

"I'm the firstborn. There're some things I'm entitled to have. Freedom, that's one. And respect. That son-of-a-bitch is tres-

passing on my territory. But we'll see who comes out on top. I'm going to put him in his place."

Bile rose in his throat and choked him; the words became inchoate. They were unnecessary by then. It was feeling that moved him to action, not words, not thought.

His face dark with anger's heat, the slingshot he had invented in one hand, the other closed around the secret contents in its palm, he approached his brother. He went silently, deliberately. There's no doubt that, sitting there, waiting, he had planned it all out carefully. He was never impulsive, my Cain. By the time Abel had heard the brush of his movement and, curious, had turned his face from his flock, Cain was less than ten paces away. When his brother saw who was there and the threat in his posture, a cold flash of fear struck like the ice of winter lightning through his body. Cain saw the spasm and smiled.

Then Abel opened his mouth to speak. But the time for speech was over. No words came out, only a high-pitched dying squeal. Cain had twirled the slingshot and released the fatal stone. With it had come winged silence. For Abel, that was the end.

He had been put in his place. That was right. There would be no more competition from him; no more trespassing. The favored one had been spoiled for the last time. Finally he had gotten what was coming to him.

Abel landed in the shallows of the stream. His life pulsing out, he fell among the confused sheep, staining the rocks and their wool with his life's blood. Bleating helplessly, the crowding, frightened animals shifted under his weight. Then they began to run, nudging each other, out of the rushing current and into the meadow, trampling and flattening the thick grass as they went, following their leader into the horizon. Before the moving waters had washed Abel's face clean, they were gone.

Some say that red hyacinths bloom every spring in the field where he died that day. I've seen a few there myself year after year, but I've never attributed them to Abel's blood.

Leaving his half-brother's body behind, Cain had disappeared before the sheep did. Triumphant, he was off on an exultant run, sure-footed and easy. While I watched from above, he went on and on, across wooded streams, open grasslands, around the ponds and through bushes and trees. After a while his activity developed from aimless motion into a pattern. He began to follow the narrow trails the sheep had made as they had climbed the hills at dawn and retraced their steps by the same route at the day's end or the season's.

When he reached the summit and stretched out his arms to the heavens, shouting defiantly, I turned away, fluttering my wings, nervous, anxious. For the first time, I feared for him. It was an arrogant act. *Nobody* threatens the Royal Omnipotence. That is, nobody in his right mind.

But there was no response, no reaction from on high. Perhaps He had not seen? Perhaps He had not heard? That was hard to believe. Impossible.

When he returned, exhausted and dirty, to the family cave, Cain was prepared to bluff it out, to evade his parents' queries as they went about their evening meal. But neither Adam nor Eve questioned him about his brother's whereabouts. In the first place, they weren't about to raise any touchy subject which might set him off again. In the second, they simply assumed, as they always had, that he wouldn't know. As I said before, the two young men had always spent their days apart.

But peace was temporary where they dined that night. Suddenly all around them in the darkness the vertebrae at the back of the earth heaved and shook, parted and re-joined. In the space of a few moments great crevices appeared and disappeared, filling the atmosphere with the grinding, painful sounds of sheering rock. Then, as Cain, with his usual indifference to commotion around him, was raising a leg of lamb to his mouth, lightning zig-zagged into the peak behind him. With it came a violent clash of thunder. None of them had ever see a display like that. It was of unimaginable magnitude, so close that they

could smell ozone in the air, hear fractured boulders crashing their way to the ground. The sky was black, moonless.

The little ones, and even the adults, were amazed, struck speechless. They sat still, in place, expectantly waiting for the downpour such a show usually heralded, but no rain fell. Then the Great Voice interjected Itself into their company. Its cadence was portentous. God was addressing Himself to Cain and, as always, the Master of Rhetorical Questions was asking one to which He already knew the answer:

"Where is Abel, your brother?"

Surprised and shocked, the parents looked at their oldest son, waiting to hear what he would say. He was smiling quietly to himself, paying no attention to the Questioner, looking at the leg of lamb still in his hand. Above him, the stars paled under the impact of another flash of lightning. Once again the thunder rolled and the Voice spoke, repeating the same words in a heavy, demanding tone. There was no way out. Cain had to answer and so he replied, flippantly, with careless bravado, staring upwards into the heavens, confronting the Invisible Face of God.

"How should I know? Am I my brother's keeper?"

The irreverent tone of the questions sent Eve into hysterical tears; her stomach was in turmoil. Here was the Holy One speaking in her presence again, addressing her oldest son ... and in such a way! Something terrible must have happened.

The Almighty wasn't about to take any more evasive comment from the man He was questioning.

"Your brother's blood cries out to Me."

Then she knew what had happened; there was no avoiding the knowledge. Eve began to scream, Adam to groan, and the younger children to bawl in sympathetic fright.

Ignoring the tumult, the Almighty raised the volume of His Voice so that He could be heard. There was not much more He had to say, but He continued. Until He came to His Judgment.

"Your brother shall have his retribution, Cain. I will not take your life, but for Abel's sake and in his memory, you shall be banished. You will live out your years as a fugitive, a vagabond, and a despised wanderer in hiding for the rest of your days on earth."

By the time the pronouncement was underway, the children had been hushed. Eve herself had quieted down, subsiding into breath-catching little sobs so she could hear what was going on. And, as I would have expected of him, Cain had begun to pull himself together. He wasn't admitting his guilt, that he had killed his brother on purpose but, ever the crafty bargainer, he set out to get his sentence reduced. He insisted that everyone he met would be out to kill him, that his life would be short.

"Am I to die, then, for one impulsive act?" Was that the Lord's intention, in spite of what He said?

God heard and He relented — to a certain degree. The Almighty knew what Cain had not yet learned: that the half-human was immortal. He knew that Cain's punishment would not be death. He could not be killed by accident or by any intention other than that of the Supernatural. The fratricide would never die.

The Most Holy revised the sentence He had just handed out. He went ahead and banished Cain, but He placed a mark upon his face so that he would be recognized wherever he went. It was for his protection, as well as for punishment. All men would know that he was the one who had killed his brother, and for no reason other than jealousy. They would scorn and distrust him.

The mark would identify him the rest of his days and his name become a synonym for fratricide, for hatred between brothers or close friends. His flippant question, loaded with the implication of treachery and deceit, would be repeated and recognized in many languages wherever mortals dwelt throughout the earth, as long as humanity endured.

For others, the mark imposed upon him would have been the source of shame and self-hatred, as well as one of unhappy social isolation, but it was not that way for Cain. So what if it showed? For him, it was a badge of identity, of his distinctiveness. It was an advertisement for his independence.

As soon as the bargaining was over, without so much as a fare-thee-well, Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and from that of his parents and his brothers and sisters. He hoped never to see any of them again. As far as I know, and I made it my business to know, that is exactly the way things turned out. He never visited either Adam or Eve. He never renewed his acquaintance with the next-born son, Seth, or any of the half- brothers and sisters left behind. Nor did he try to get rid of those who remained or replaced him in the family circle. He went his own way.

He had freed himself of that family net but not of his humanity.

For years he lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden, where he arrived after years of wandering. There he married a woman who, when she married him, acted as if she couldn't see God's mark. If she knew it was there, it was a long time before she mentioned it. The woman was the oldest child of a large, poor family. Being his wife, she wouldn't have wanted to believe that God had laid His mark upon her husband, labeling him outcast forever. Cain wore his hair long and unkempt then and his beard full, so there was little of his face that could be seen.

The outward appearance of the mark, its dark coloration, never faded over the years and the malediction attached to it, lying deep below, far beyond sight, never lessened. It was the curse not of his killing but of its cause, the curse of being a moral half-breed, the mixed son of demon and human, the curse of evil trying to harness good, to trap it, extinguish it. It was the bane of not having the power to choose which part of him was which or the ability to remedy what he would have liked to reject. He could not rid himself of the human half: indeed, that

inability was the base of the curse — its permeating, permanent center. Nor could he alter or terminate his negative nature.

And so eternal life became the greatest punishment that God could have inflicted on him. With it came the loss of the power that was so important to him. He grew older and older, disintegrating, decaying but without losing the inextinguishable flame of life, without the ability to shuck off his human body. Without the power to sleep forever, to find peace in nothingness, to return to the blissful void.

He had claimed that he was not his brother's keeper; the Almighty deprived him of the right even to be his own. As he grew older, he was imprisoned in the decaying flesh, dust redistributed by every breath of air, but with mind and half-person still aware beneath it all.

That was the real curse, his real doom: immortality.

The woman he bargained into marriage so long ago never bore him a child and, eventually, she found another mate. (I will tell you more about that later.) Generation after generation has been born of human coupling since Cain went to Nod, but all remained strangers to him. None have survived him.

Was his punishment just? There are those who would make excuses for such a heavy sentence, but no sensible person could believe that the Almighty is always just. Merciful sometimes perhaps, but not necessarily truly just. He had expelled Adam and Eve for a relatively minor misdemeanor, hadn't He? Changed their lives permanently. As well as the lives of those who came afterward. For a first offense.

What was obvious to me was that Cain hadn't learned early enough what he couldn't get away with in the earthly world. God's Power was of a magnitude that he didn't understand until much later in his life. His father had tried to bring him to worship, but he hadn't emphasized the need for obedience — either to himself or, much more importantly, to the Heavenly Father.

At that time of his life Adam was not an accomplished, finished man. Or parent. He was a prototype with rough edges, an irregular pattern or model. He hadn't turned entirely bad, but he was no saint, either. There were a lot of things he got away with that his son, Cain, didn't. For instance, Adam was a liar himself. After all, he told his wife that he was through with me, that I had gone away, long before it was true.

Adam couldn't have been surprised that Cain evaded the issue when he was asked what had happened to Abel. It was only a passive untruth, not an active lie. There was a shallow, human side to his deceit, a minor side that came from his father, as well as the more complicated, more interesting, more soaring evil he inherited from me. Murder is a cut above prevarication. Especially killing within the family.

Without making myself known to him, I kept track of Cain in the course of my travels. When we did meet again, he didn't recognize me. That's not surprising since, though I am unchanged, he hardly knew me. I, of course, after all this time am still young, but inside I have gone on accruing knowledge, storing experience in solid banks of memory.

There are no dreams of lost youth in Heaven; memories only exist in Hell. Stuck with them for eternity, we have to make the best of them. There is no way to get rid of the past except to change it ourselves — alter or embroider it to make it more acceptable in memory. And God must be willing to let us do that, as you and I know.

CHAPTER 8

Isaac, I named him — the first son of Adam and Eve and, because of that, the first Isaac. Of the hundreds of offspring I've produced I haven't found much reason to remember any one of them in particular. Since all but one — the one I had by Adam — were wholly demon, they came and they left, returned or didn't with no special concern or interest on my part. What I felt toward these unidentifiable clones was indifference. I was only the factory and they, the manufactured "goods." Or "evils," if you prefer.

But Isaac, the child, the changeling, my compulsory adoptee, was different. He was an impossible soul. Yes, that's the word. It came with the product, a consequence of being human. He had a soul — a spirit and a conscience — and I was stuck with it and with him. It was a soul laden with guilt, guilt whose origin was unknown to him, but not to me. I knew where he had gotten it. It was a straight-line gift from the Most Holy through his

parents, through Adam and Eve who had committed the Original Sin when they disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden.

The Almighty had given Adam and Eve souls along with the cash of free will and, when they had spent that free will so unwisely, they had to cope with the blot on their credit. At least his parents knew that they were guilty and why; the son inherited the remorse without knowledge of its cause. As the first wholly human child, Isaac had inherited both their sin and their guilt.

Do you think that was fair?

If Isaac were to have children, they too would carry the weight of this awkward punishment just as Adam and Eve's future grandchildren would. But you don't know yet whether he had any children, do you? That part comes later.

Like all the human progeny who came after him, Isaac needed mothering in infancy. There were days when it seemed to me that he was going to need it all the way into adulthood. He was not my sort at all — not instinctively wrong-doing, bad or even sufficiently capricious, unreliable or tough. Humans might admire this sort of character but, from my point of view, he was a spongelike weakling, oozing back the affection he absorbed from others. Since I had little enough of that to give him, what he got was mostly from the animals he tamed.

That didn't stop him from trying. It was a game and love was what he hoped to win. At first he was the only player; later I joined in.

The way he clung to me made me think of him as a leech, feeding on my physical presence as if he could draw blood for nourishment. As time went on, I realized that his treatment of me was a means to an end — a means of proving his virtue to himself, a means of assuaging that strange, chronic wave of self-condemnation and guilt. The boy felt he had to be a "good" son and he worked at it. Worked at trying to be helpful, among other things. Trying to be obedient, loyal and true. The first natural Boy Scout. They went together, these traits. If she had

known her son, Eve would have been proud of him. It was part of her human nature to have pride in those qualities, just as it was for her to be ashamed of Cain for being the straightforward, independent creature that he was.

But, as for myself, I was a demon, not a human. What did I want with a little Boy Scout? I found him a dreadful nuisance, an intrusion in my life. He was there hour after hour, night after day, year after year, trying to get me to bring him up right, to "do" right by him. Not I the mother, but *he* the child was defining our roles. For example, I was expected to mother like a human mortal — that is, to reward him when he behaved himself and, in equal parts, to scold or punish him appropriately when he disobeyed. Why should I have had to learn to behave that way? It was against my nature.

Raising him turned out to be more complicated than I had expected. I had to tighten my defenses, to devise schemes to keep ahead of him. Some of these clever plots I enjoyed very much, adding variations of my own.

For a long time, as Isaac grew up, I played a particularly entertaining game with him — although I never described it to him that way. I designed the whole procedure to keep him in his place: subordinate to me. Since we were the only players, it soon became a part of our everyday lives. The rules were simple enough, based as they were on chicanery. There was just one basic plan: that was only for me to play the Devil's Advocate, perpetually tricking him into wrongdoing by surrounding him with accessible temptations. Temptations of access and deed. I was the serpent in the Garden of Eden again, but without taking that form.

To begin with, I set up rules that common sense or minimal reason dictated should be disregarded because they were obstacles to conventional goals instead of aids to achieving them. Then I rewarded Isaac when he disobeyed and punished him when he obeyed. Needless to say, he became thoroughly confused. If he were really going to obey me, he had to be disobe-

dient. To give you one example of what I'm talking about: I had always told him to avoid other human children, that they were dangerous, treacherous beings. After I began this game, I ordered him to find a child to play with, to bring one home with him. Because he couldn't understand why I had changed my mind about their nature, he went out of his way not to encounter any of them. That day was no different. When he came home without a friend, shamefaced, I rewarded him with a ride on my back.

Another time I warned him not to fish in a nearby stream, one plentifully stocked with a favorite food. I didn't give him any reason, just forbade his going there. For days afterwards I watched him standing at the shore, gazing into the waters, wondering why he shouldn't catch what was so abundant, so convenient. Finally, one afternoon he broke the rule. When he brought home the fish, nervous and worried about my reaction, I greeted him with praise.

That was the paradox, the built-in catch. There was no way that he could satisfy his longing to be obedient and please me. When he disobeyed, I gave him a treat or praise; when he obeyed, I punished him. Sometimes I reversed my tactics. That way I kept him hopelessly confused.

There has to be an entity for something to be broken, doesn't there? Something that exists as an object or in the mind. In truth, it is not possible to disobey when no rules are laid out; you can't be an outlaw without laws. So I made the rules, planning-in secretly the opportunity to break them. He didn't realize it at the time, but I was trying to give him the greatest gift of all: freedom of choice. He received it, but he returned the gift unopened.

Perhaps some mysterious force apart from my presence socialized him. Was it our interfering Heavenly Father? I'll never know. But, at any rate, Isaac never did learn how to take advantage of the freedom I offered. In fact, he rejected it because what he *wanted* was restriction and control. That was

the sort of creature he was. I may have had to keep him alive, but I was not prepared to be the electric fence that kept him bounded and completely without harm.

As you can tell, in every way I could I encouraged his shadow side. That was not easy. In fact, it was exhausting. I whispered temptations into his ears, painted word pictures of treats he could have for himself with just a very little deceit. Once I even took the form of a serpent again and tried, as a friendly stranger, a mythological dream, to get him to do something I'd expressly forbidden to him. You could say that I turned off the electricity and opened the gate, but even that was not enough. There was a strong inner core that rebelled against any suggestion of evil.

Can it be true that what is within a man — and not what assaults him from the exterior world — determines what befalls him and how he reacts to it? Adam could not re-make Cain; I could not transform Isaac. As long as he lived, each remained his own person.

When he could talk, Isaac began calling me "Mother." Where did he learn it? I don't know; the word just came to him. "Mother!" Can you imagine that? A new title but one already charged with aging, binding roles, family duties and filial devotion. "Call me 'Lilith!' Call me anything you like," I told him, "but make it negative, or at least neutral, please!" I hate that word "Mother." It is such a positively loaded, hypocritical title. A biological fact has been turned into a paean. He didn't understand why I was upset but Isaac being Isaac, his usual obedient self, he started addressing me by my proper name.

"Lilith," he tried it out, tentatively rolling the noun on his tongue, testing for ease, for flavor and texture. "Lilith. Lilith." Whenever he said it, as the years passed, it still came out awkwardly, self-consciously. He went on thinking he was being rude but, in his usual way, trying to please.

The truth was that, even if he had called me a bitch or a whore, the words would have been drenched with sweetness. I kept hoping that sugared grape would grow up to be a raisin,

dried and soured, but since he never did anything really nasty, I was hard put to bring him up to take that kind of behavior for granted. It was impossible to teach him to do anything mean or scheming. Especially not on purpose.

He clung to me so thoroughly that I had to hide from him from time to time in order to put my principal weapon into effect. That weapon was neglect. Just leaving him to take care of himself. Even that didn't work very well. All it did was make him more clinging when I was around, make him try to learn what to do when I wasn't there, make him try to figure out why I was so neglectful as a parent.

As time went on, I did try to set an example for him, to encourage him to walk the right path. That is, through the right swamp, quagmire, wasteland, or desert. The negative road, the perverse trail. At first he reacted with amazement. When it happened over and over again, at each new occurrence he looked at me with reproachful eyes and said nothing. He was trapped by his own rules, not mine, don't you see? Since I was his mother, I was entitled to respect. He felt he had no right to be critical of me or to rebuke me.

Cain never felt that way about Eve. Not that he quarrelled with her; he just went his own way whether she liked it or not. But Isaac, a displaced person, thought I was a Rightful Authority. He believed in filial devotion, that it was a sacred duty, and so he was dutiful. That was it. That was the awful truth. He never saw the traffic signs, the road markers, charting the easy Primrose Path to damnation. Or, if he saw them, he misinterpreted them so that he chose to continue on another, more difficult, route.

I can give you a couple of examples of what I'm talking about.

First, when he was still very young, he broke a demon's bowl that I used for various magical practices. It was an extraordinary bowl, on a stand and truly global, almost closed at the top. One of your cohorts in Hell had blown it for me, his hot breath shaping a glass whose glowing iridescence shone through a

rough surface. It was my bowl, no one else's, made for me, and I used it daily to mix concoctions to harm, to foresee, or to recall the past.

Sometimes I used it just to put on a show for Isaac, provoking swirls of colored steam or a dust storm moving in concentric circles like a tiny whirlwind within the glass. When I really wanted to impress him, I caused whole landscapes to form: miniature glaciers growing ice sculptures, rivers flooding, land faulting into mountains and valleys, forests developing fully in the course of minutes and deserts baking into nothingness or dissolving. Now and then I added animals and plants of various species and moved them around, enacting their lives' dramas to suit my fancy.

Until I decided to make them disappear.

I was a puppeteer, altering the scenery and devising my script as the characters came on stage.

This was not a small vessel. To give you an idea of its size, I can tell you that sometimes, when it was in place on a smooth surface or in a niche, my great owl settled on its rim. It was as if he knew that it and he were partners in iniquity and he belonged there.

I was still exploring all the aspects of my trade as Isaac grew up and I spent much of my time experimenting with the contents of my demon's bowl. Too much time, I guess Isaac thought. Late one afternoon, when he had been a while trying to get my attention, he asked, "Lilith, do you love me as much as you do that bowl?"

Should I have answered him with the truth? If I had, that would have been a long answer which went something like this: "Sometimes you're interesting. I have to admit that, but I don't love you at all. Demons don't love or hate; they just *are*. If you're anything to me, mostly it's just a nuisance, an impediment to my life." As it was, I just smiled without saying anything and went on with what I was doing.

He didn't repeat his question.

Less than a week later, returning home in the early morning from one of my foraging trips, drifting through the dawn mists, I came within sight of Isaac as I fluttered in to land. He had filled my demon's bowl partway with water from the stream, intending to play at incantations and spells as the numinous sun cracked open and flooded the horizon. The empty bucket was set down at his side and he was waving his arms in the air, trying to evoke the spirit slaves who enable my magic. The next move was to lift the bowl off its pedestal and hold it aloft with both hands while chanting an invocation. He had seen me do it many times.

Yes, he had often seen me do this. He had even learned the words I used. But the difference was not just in our size and our experience or my power and repeated practice of this ritual, although he lacked all of these. Water and weight were his downfall. His hands were still wet from filling the bucket. The outside surface of the bowl was slippery where the water had sloshed over during the filling and, most of all, the bowl was heavy.

As I watched, it grew heavier. And heavier. In my annoyance at his meddling, while I was still far away from him, I was forcing him to put it down. The added weight surprised him. He hugged the bowl's rotund surface more tightly, unwilling to give up and so, of course, his wet hands slipped out of place. Then the struggle was over; he had dropped the great glass.

As the splinters flew over the ground, he burst into tears. Yes, he was sorry, but I was sorrier. No, that's not the truth. I wasn't sorry; I was angry. Very angry. *Furious!* It was several moments before he had cleared his eyes enough to see me hovering there, afire and steaming with rage. Inflamed with the heat of Hell itself, my lower body was sending off great burning tentacles of incandescent orange and red. Dense clouds, filled with the incarnadine molten droplets I was emanating, swirled about me, obscuring the flesh within.

All this active pageantry was an incredible shock to the boy — just as I intended it to be. Immobilized with terror, transfixed with fear and drained white of all blood-propelled physical power, he could neither scream nor run. I could hear his heart knocking against the ribs of his chest like an oversized pebble in a child's wooden rattle. Never before had he seen me in this state, inflamed like this. Accustomed as he was to my shape-shifting, he still couldn't recognize me. At least, not as his Lilith, his "Mother," guardian authority and protector.

In the end, as I cooled, returning to my everyday texture, temperature and coloring, I decided the fright had been punishment enough.

That was the closest I ever came to violating my pact with Adam. I had kept his son safe from harm. I had frightened him, evoked the respondent chill of fear, but I had not burned him. It was a close call, that one.

As I said before, Isaac later took the whole blame on himself for what had happened that day. And so he should have. But his reaction was excessive. He begged me to tell him what he could do to get me another demon's bowl. He wanted one for himself, too. I was sure of that, just as it was obvious that he wanted to learn my craft by mimicking me and practicing by himself.

"Shut up!" I said rudely. "Don't remind me of your foolishness." To myself, I added: "Awkward boy, pathetic mortal, you'll never be a magician. Let alone a demon. There is no demon's bowl that would lend you magic. You don't belong in the sorcerers' world."

After much searching, I found the source for another bowl. It would be blown in the same Netherworld as the first. Having no access to this Inferno, Isaac had no way of ever getting one for me. Or for himself. He knew nothing of Hell in those days nor even where my original armament had come from.

Another irritating incident happened when he broke a young sapling by swinging on it. I didn't mind the breakage — just the fact that he hadn't intended to do it. Throughout the years he

lived with me, I always hoped his misdeeds were more than just accidents, more than the usual occurrences in the ordinary course of youthful investigations and experiments. I kept trying to find a malicious streak in him. He had often swung on a tree branch, bending it towards the ground, then pushing off with his feet. What he got was a free ride through the air. It was an everyday boyish stunt with pliant growth — young fruit trees, maples or birches.

But one day he chose a branch that wasn't strong enough to bear his weight and, when he let it go to get his ride, it snapped. He realized that, even if the tree didn't die, it would still be crippled, dwarfed, and misshapen the rest of its life.

It was a problem the size of a nit. There were lots of other trees. Lots just like that one. But there he was, feeling terribly guilty about something that didn't matter at all.

Believing that I could heal it, he came to find me, to see if there were anything I would do to help restore the tree. He knew I'd see its wounds as soon as I went in that direction, but he still wasn't old enough or experienced enough to know what my reaction to them would be.

"Mother," he said, reverting to that obnoxious, formal title. "I've broken that poor little tree. The birch in the wheat grass meadow."

Well done, I wanted to say. I hope, while it lasted, you enjoyed doing the damage. And are planning more.

What I did say was "How did you do that?" I already knew the answer. He had made an error in judgment. He admitted it — at length. He blurted out the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, taking the blame completely on himself, with no evasion. I was disappointed, of course. If only he had lied, blamed what had happened on other miraculous or natural causes — a storm or animals! I would have been so pleased, thinking he was making some progress toward iniquity, one small step toward the demonic. What he had actually done was so petty! And what an opportunity to deceive me he had missed!

There was a pause while I considered my next move. Then, like a therapist giving him a chance to express his feelings, I asked the obvious question.

"How do you feel about what you've done?"

"I feel terrible." As usual, he went on being honest. "It's the first time I've ever hurt a living thing as badly as that. I can feel its shock, its pain, its surprise at what I've done. Isn't there something we can do to make it better? To help it grow back the way it was?

"You know a lot more about these things than I do."

As you know, I am better at breaking than mending, given to cutting rather than sewing, to butchery rather than healing, but indeed I did know a lot more about these things than he did. Certainly I knew what was worth doing and what wasn't. I knew something else, too — that it was important for him to cultivate the selfish side of himself. To find pleasure in destruction, in the working of evil, whether it be subtle or obvious. He should have been building his own capability for negative power, even if it would be put to nothing more than trivial applications such as this one. In a roundabout way I told him so.

"Isaac," I said severely, dropping the therapeutic role and reverting abruptly to my usual self. "There's only one thing to do. Go out and swing on another young tree limb. Break some more branches. Wound some more living things."

He looked at me, astonished.

"I mean it. If you want to stop hurting when you do what some people call 'wrong' or 'evil,' you'll have to practice. You have to do it deliberately. Over and over again — until you numb out that foolish conscience. That's the trouble with your being human. You're stuck with your soul. Your unremitting, unceasing sense of guilt. Self-protective, autonomous behavior doesn't come naturally to you the way it does to me."

I didn't say "autonomous *evil* behavior." I put it more softly, more obliquely than that, but you can understand anyway why he was shocked. This was a new experience for him. For one

thing, I was suggesting that he and I were different. Never before had I even hinted that I might not be a member of the same species that he was, that we might not be kin.

His reaction was purely defensive: he didn't believe what he was hearing. He should have. It was time that he started consolidating and integrating all the base, corrupt values he'd seen me enact over the years. He'd seen, but he hadn't really recorded, hadn't begun to take for granted what he'd observed. He still thought everything negative was an exception that didn't count in the overall reckoning of deeds. When it happened, he believed that it was purely by accident and that we, the actors, always felt sorry about what we'd done and tried to make up for it.

It was time that foolishness stopped, time he realized that noxious actions were not random occurrences, that they were always planned. That they should be. I had always known that, sooner or later, he had to encounter *my* reality, *my* belief system, and that of all the demonic world. He had to learn to accept the truth about the source of motivation. Everybody looks after Number One. They may try to disguise it, but that's all they care about. It's not as if this idea were open to argument. You know that as well as I do.

So, at long last, I set out to teach him. I was using words, not just showing him deeds from which I hoped he'd learn. And I was outspoken.

"*Construction* is a slow process; it takes time and effort, a different kind of learning. There'll always be lots of incorrigible optimists you can count on to keep on trying to build. Let them waste their time. You don't have to do that. *Destruction* is better; it is simpler and you can do it every day. Short term or long term — whichever you choose. You don't need much education or magic to make it work, although both help. You don't even need much practice, just the willingness to get to it."

I had been preaching about abstractions, so I thought I'd wind up with a concrete suggestion for action, a good, negative one.

"Now, if you don't think much of breaking trees, why don't you try stealing next? Isn't there something you'd like to have that you can take away from someone who already has it? You can trap one of those strangers. If you do it in the dark and use a weapon, you can probably even rob a victim who's larger and older than you are. Go do it. You're a smart young man. You'll be surprised at what a sense of power success gives you."

I added, "What's more, every time you do it, both your capability and your willingness to use it will grow. Success breeds success. You'll see."

In the past I had kept him away from other human children. I had brought him up thinking of them as aliens — strange, soppy, dangerous creatures he was forbidden to approach. Beings who would injure him if they had a chance. I had run a hate campaign, one based on these stereotypes. Now I was changing tactics, telling him to go to it, to make contact and seek them out. I was teaching him to harm them before they could get to him. To do unto them before they could do unto him.

That was the first time I had ever been so direct with him, so candid, so outspoken. I wasn't being funny or contrary, the way I'd been in the past. If he had looked at me, he would have seen a straight face, one without a hint of humor or joking. But guilt was festering inside him. As far as he was concerned, by enlarging the subject, I was changing it. Getting off track. At that moment all he could think of was the injured birch. His gaze was focused away, on the remote hills. He had stopped hearing me.

Soon after that, without responding at all to my lesson, he left. Back to mourn, impotently, by the broken tree.

I kept trying to empower him, but he just wouldn't cooperate. Too human by far.

CHAPTER 9

I'll tell you another example of Isaac's weakness, one that happened some years later when he was an adolescent.

From his infancy, that boy was always dependent, forever hanging around to make sure he wasn't left alone for long. He wanted to go with me wherever I went, even if it were barely out of his sight. As much as I hated it, I was his unwilling security blanket. Just one thing saved my sanity during those years: the fact that he slept at night. Unknown to him, I made most of my journeys in the dark while he lay, heavy and unconscious, in his sleeping area. Sometimes I visited you down here in hot, bright Hades, surfacing with the dawn, and closing my pattern of travel as the light emerged over the curve of the earth.

When Isaac was approaching adulthood, just once I took him with me when I set out to frighten pregnant women into dropping their precious loads. I say it was just once because that trip didn't turn out at all the way I thought it would and there

weren't going to be any more like it. Taking him was a big mistake. To begin with, at that age he was still too inhibited or too timid to ask questions. He was just happy to have me invite him along wherever I was going. I suppose that he may have made his own assumptions, but he didn't base them on the facts of the case: what I actually intended to do and why I was doing it. To all intents and purposes, he knew nothing about what I did almost nightly as a pleasant routine of habit, nothing about what I had in mind for this excursion or my reasons for any of them.

But I knew, I knew. I was getting even with the Almighty who had tricked me into having a half-mortal child. I had already made my unwilling contribution to His Grand Scheme, the population of the earth. I couldn't stop the process He'd planned, but I could impede it, slow it down, by cutting at least part of it off at the start.

I was a practiced abortionist; my tool, terror.

When I invited Isaac to ride with me, I was thinking positively, thinking that I'd try to put this nuisance to work helping me.

You see, he was clever with his hands, that human was, good at building things. So, in preparation for the trip, I encouraged him to make himself an ugly mask out of straw and wood, to stain it with clay and herb pigments. Wearing it, he could be as terrifying a sight as I, in spite of all my beauty, could make myself when I wanted to.

By that time he was used to the various imaginative, distorted forms I could assume. He had seen me change size and shape, coloring and body mass, many times. It never entered his mind that anyone was going to be really scared by the dark, mysterious configurations we thought up. Nor did the possibility of injury to others ever occur to him even when he joined me in making ourselves terrifying. He didn't know anything at all about what was going on. Or its meaning.

To begin with, he didn't know that I was only after women or that the whole project was old hat to me. He thought of it as an interesting experiment, an early "Trick or Treat!" to get the jump of fear out of someone by catching him or her off guard. He even expected to take off his mask and laugh about it all with the person later, as soon as he'd gotten the instantaneous, scared reaction he thought would be so funny.

You can see how naive he still was.

Needless to say, I didn't tell him my expectations. He didn't ask; I didn't answer. I, and I alone, knew that we were only going after a woman — and not just any woman but one with child. It was a single, simple mission, a serious one. I didn't expect to laugh with my victim; I expected to laugh at her after I knew that she had lost her baby. Then and not before. That would be the part that amused me — a successful miscarriage, a dead fetus, and the disappointment of a mortal who was "expecting" something else.

On the afternoon of the day I had chosen for our trial run, I had awakened my gray owl, the way I usually did, to take him with us. He was glad to come. His great round eyes were glistening with moisture as he blinked into consciousness. Then I handed the bird to Isaac who fastened him to his wrist with a loosely tied thong. When we started out together, he carried the owl and I supported him on my back, sheltered between my wings. I flew over one of the lonely mountain trails. Twilight was approaching as we cruised, the evening sun softening and spreading.

There, on the shadowed path below, one solitary figure was returning home late. She was supporting a full basket strapped over her shoulders and around her back. Nervous at the fading of the light, she was awkward, hurrying. I could see the newly rounded contours of her breasts and belly and soon Isaac could hear me clucking with success. I was in luck, I was thinking. She appeared to be just what I was looking for, a victim at the right stage of fetal development for terror to have serious effect.

Ah, but the best laid schemes of both demon and human do sometimes go astray!

Usually when I head for a target, I let out a screech, high-pitched and penetrating to the heart like a slim rapier missile. But that time I had to come in silently — at least at first. I couldn't use that attack since I had to let Isaac down from my back, safe on the earth and hidden behind a crumbling rock, before I announced my presence. That was impediment enough but worse followed. The biggest mistake I made was not getting myself going as soon as I had landed and Isaac had disembarked. Once he had alighted, out of her range of sight, I had planned to leave him there to do whatever mischief he wanted to do while I took off again. I wanted to give him a little scope to see what he would come up with.

As for me, in due time I planned to join in with his activities, then probably follow the rest of my usual routine, circling the woman as I approached and screeching into her face during a final plummet. Black wings spread wide and claws out for maximum effect — although I didn't plan to touch the creature. I wasn't going to frighten her to death, either. Just scare her enough to free the captive infant before it could join the burgeoning populace.

What happened? By now you can probably guess: a fiasco.

Mask in place, his face hidden, arms flailing, Isaac stepped out in front of the woman as she rounded the corner by the rock where he stood hidden.

Surprise! Surprise!

But she wasn't the only one who was startled. Isaac himself was taken aback. Up so close, face to face, she certainly didn't look to him as if she could hurt him. Or wanted to. For one split second, after he had already started whooping at her, the din faded. If this were one, he wondered why he had been warned away from humans.

There was no such pause in her reaction. Jolted into an acute state of panic, her response to the masked man was unambigu-

ous; it was only to escape. Panting, burdened, she turned and started to run back the way she had come. On her left, those great eroded rocks, chips off the sides of the mountains, their sharp edges stacked unevenly overlapping each other, closed off any exit from the trail. Since there was a ravine on the other side, she had to stay balanced on the narrow path or fall over the edge of the precipice.

Above the two of them my owl, by then released from Isaac's arm and in wingspread flight silhouetted against the day's last gleam, was ta-whit ta-whooing the message of my presence.

By then, Isaac had conquered his hesitation and was chasing after her, pouring out all sorts of nonsensical noise from his vocal chords as he went. The runner increased her pace, turning her head just far enough to see how rapidly her pursuer was following. To her horror, he was gaining on her, changing his cries to a wail that echoed against the impending boulders as he passed by them. Sliding, veering precariously toward the cliff like a novice ice skater who, tipping out of control, had lost the last of her balance, the mortal gave up hope for escape. She collapsed and, as she did, threw her hands down protectively sheltering her belly. She looked so absurd, so ridiculously afraid, such a caricature, that Isaac hesitated.

But not for long. Inside the covering on his face he exploded, bubbling up with laughter, laughter that was typical of him, rising from the viscera and crowding out all thought, all power of reason. There was not enough room, not enough air, for such a volume of merriment.

So he pulled off his mask to free it.

Just what I had been afraid he'd do. He hadn't taken the foray seriously enough to find out what it was all about, hadn't been out to trick, to wound or to force an injury deliberately the way that I had been. He had acted in ignorance and reacted in ignorance.

But it was really the laughter, not the disclosure of his boyish face, that ruined my chances. His laugh echoed in a sweet ring,

over and over again, finally diminishing in a repetition full of promise, without a touch of the macabre or the malevolent to it. That surprised exuberance was healing. In fact, to humans, it was both mending and appealing. But not to me. My body grew cold when I heard it and I began to shiver. The young woman on the path didn't shiver. For her, as it would have been for others like her, the sound was restoring, therapeutic.

It was just what she needed to keep her from falling, just what she had to have to retain the fetus in place. That most fortunate of woman! Before I had realized it, my jaw had tightened so strongly that I bloodied my tongue on one fang.

Once Isaac had begun to laugh, I didn't bother to continue. There was no point in making the spectacular dive I had planned. Instead, I made a wide, low turn emitting a screech which neither of them noticed. Then I sailed away, coasting to a spot still within earshot. When she realized that the creature she had believed was attacking her was actually a game-playing young man, a human like herself, she no longer felt vulnerable. Isaac moved toward her and soon he was helping her up, righting her basket and, in the process, inviting her to join him in amusement at her fright.

"But that wasn't funny," she protested, shaking her head as a third and then a fourth risible wave floated past her and on, up to where I hovered, invisible, in the air above them. She was freeing her hands to brush the loose dirt from her knees and her elbows. "What did you think you were doing? I could have hurt myself."

"I wouldn't have let you," Isaac assured her. "It was only for fun. I wasn't going to hurt you, either. I'm sorry I scared you so badly.

"But you should have seen yourself! Your eyes were bugging out, your mouth wide open. Your hair was switching like a horse's tail chasing flies, like a wing trying to fly you away. I didn't know what to expect, but I didn't expect whatever was going to happen to be this funny!"

Isaac burst into that golden gale again, choking off more words. His eyes were watering.

"That bad, huh?"

She thought the trickery was unfair but, in a moment or two, his merriment was too contagious for her and she succumbed. Caught in its flood, she began to giggle herself, imagining how she must have looked to an outsider.

Well, I can tell you that the whole episode was too much for me. My laughter has to be grounded in real malice, not in such trivia, such petty entertainment. She hadn't been hurt and, by that time, she wasn't even annoyed anymore.

When the laughter had slowed and finally stopped, she asked about the mask, and he began to show her its construction, how he'd made it, the work he'd put into it, step by step, and the dyes he'd used.

"You can make one for yourself, if you like. It's not that hard."

"I don't think I'd use one," she said, hinting politely that the stunt he'd pulled was a juvenile one. "But perhaps the little one might some day." She gestured toward the baby still safely cosseted in her womb, resting her hand on the roundness there.

Isaac knew about birth from the wild mammals with whom he had grown up. He had never thought much about it in human terms. With an easy bend, he put his head to her belly, listening. At that moment all was still. There were no sounds, no ripples of movement.

"Aren't you worried when he's so quiet?"

She laughed at him.

"It's too early. Come back in a couple of months. It'll be different then. He'll be stretching in all directions, exercising, getting in practice for life in the outside world."

Next, would you believe it, Isaac offered to accompany that stranger to her home, to make sure that she didn't get any other scares on the trail. She would take his help only so far, but he carried the packs that full distance for her, chattering as they

went. The talk was soothing and so distracting that, until he had vanished, she never thought to ask him where he lived or who he was.

I collected my owl and went for the stars which were beginning to sprinkle the darkening sky. Moonlight was shattering on the ocean cliffs. Let Isaac take care of himself. I was through with my responsibilities for the day. I wished it were forever.

Soon after that episode I began to realize that Isaac was changing, that there were some things he was not telling me. I thought perhaps it was ordinary adolescent development, just coming later than it usually would for young males. He was beginning to have secrets, to do things and think thoughts that he didn't share with me. I was glad. Any distance between us was a welcome relief — as long as he didn't get me into trouble by injuring himself.

Then there came a time when I was wandering the night skyways and some of the little furies to whom I had given birth in Egypt appeared alongside me. It wasn't often that they sought me out. Demons don't need mothering. Or instruction about how to be demonic; they come by it naturally. My genie children knew that Isaac was different from them, that he wasn't really my son, and they had something in mind when they came to find me. They wanted access to him, to test him out, to tease him. I told them that they could have my permission to go ahead, but not to hurt him in any lasting way. They weren't responsible for him, but I was. And would be for some time to come.

I thought that I could use them to keep track of him when he was out of my sight, to monitor him and report back to me.

After a while they agreed to do that, but what they really had in mind was something else, something more entertaining for them, although it was mild enough from a demonic point of view. The little ones wanted to practice being provoking, to form a backdrop to his life that was constantly irritating, a relentless pressure. They planned to exercise their skills by

invading his nighttime rest, giving him bad dreams and whispering in his ears while he was sleeping. Whispering over and over hints of secrets they knew and he didn't, that they could tell and he'd like to know, if he could.

"Where's your mother, Isaac? Where's your father?"

"Why haven't you grown wings?"

"Where did you come from, Isaac?"

"Who are you?"

"Are we your brothers?" When they asked him that, they laughed maniacally, maliciously echoing the sound against the walls of his hollow dream. "Are we your brothers? Are we your brothers ...?"

He thought of himself as my son, believed himself to be, even identified with me, rather in the way that an orphaned otter adopts a human swimmer in the ocean. But there was no reason for him to think of these night images as his brothers. There was nothing familiar to him about the round, black-winged furies flying chaotically through his dreams. There was nothing of me, or of him, apparent in them. How could he have recognized their kinship to me? How could I, with my beauty, have produced such ugliness? Nor do they take after you, O Lord of the Underworld! They are all mutants, ugly mutants.

Isaac stirred in his sleep, but didn't waken.

In succeeding nights the demons came closer and closer, faster and faster, until, at times, they occupied the entire screen of his dreams. Their repetitious comments were gravel to his mind, irritating, provoking, just the way they had hoped they would be. The questions became an endless litany of two words: "Are we? Are we?" Idealistic dreamer that he was, Isaac would have answered, if he could, that all men were brothers and, at that time, been almost literally right. But these fliers, these speakers, these provocateurs, were not humans, not *men* teasing him. Their voices ricocheted and reverberated in his mind. Talking in his sleep, thrashing about, he shifted and turned. When he awoke, he was disturbed and wondering.

Although they didn't resemble me in other ways, they had wings, my demons did, just as I did and he had none. The day came when he finally began to notice these similarities, these differences, and all the others between us. He was growing up and his world was getting more complicated. Would he begin to figure out why these things were the way they were? Something within me made me want to exhibit these dissimilarities, not necessarily to exaggerate them, but just to make them obvious, to make him realize his own limited capabilities, his insignificance.

When I noticed his close look at my mouth, for instance, his staring at the two sharp fangs I use to draw blood, I yawned, deliberately exposing them. Their cutting edges, their sharp points, gleamed in the light. For a moment I saw the yellow seep of fear in his eyes. He didn't need to look in the mirror to know that he had no natural weapons, no teeth like those.

I was opening the door a little, just to give him a hint of what lay behind, but I had to be careful. With his perverted sense of bonding, he wouldn't have run away then. But if he were afraid of me, he might possibly reject his freedom when it came time to leave. He might feel that he had to stay in order to prove to me that he wasn't scared.

He didn't comment on my teeth at the time, but soon after that he started to inquire about a number of other things, differences that he'd begun to notice.

"Lilith," he asked soon after, "when am I going to get wings like the ones you have? So I can learn to fly by myself?

"Why do my hair and my nails get longer and longer when yours don't?

"When will I stop growing older the way you have?"

He had realized that I didn't age, that the older he grew the more he was catching up with me. Unlike the length of his life, the length of mine couldn't be reckoned in years but only in aeons. The age gap between us was not frozen in time; it was closing. He was taking on a man's size and form; I was remain-

ing slender, youthful and feminine. I no longer let him ride between my wings. It had become much more dangerous as he had matured; movement by a rider the size he had become could have thrown me off balance. His mortality put my own existence in jeopardy. If he fell and were killed, my eternal life would be ended, too.

That early contract with Adam still haunted me, though its threat was less from him than it was from the Almighty who had passively guaranteed it. He wouldn't believe in accidental injury or death, a misadventure from over-confident youth. He would be sure that I hadn't kept my bargain, that I hadn't even tried.

Isaac's questions became more insistent:

"Wouldn't you be hurt if you fell? If your wings failed you in flight?

"How come I can be injured if you can't?"

Gradually he was beginning to realize that we were not of the same origin, that we were divisible, of different embodiments, each a distinct creature. Then one day he asked what every human child asks at one time or another: "Where did I come from?" If he really wanted an answer, it was the right question at the right time. I was suffering from more than enough provocation, so very aggravated by him, so bored by his constant, distracting presence, so full of the itch caused by containment, so much wishing that he would just disappear without it being considered my fault, without my being blamed for it, that I answered what he had begun to suspect.

And that was how he came to know the truth.

"Where did I come from?" he had asked and so I replied, grimly, "Not from me."

"Not from you?"

"Yes, that's right. I didn't give birth to you. We are not even members of the same family. You aren't my child at all; I've only been a foster mother to you because I was forced into it."

I grinned at him then, spreading my lips and showing my fangs. "You were a curse laid on me, an act of malice."

I repeated, "We're not related. We aren't even kin. Not the same species."

He sat upright, eyes widening and mouth falling open. All of a sudden he was really listening, paying close attention to me.

"I was a curse?"

"Yes, that's right." I went on, condensing the tale for him.

"I was designed and made by our Almighty Father. So was your own father and, later, your mother came from him, not just from God's material base. Your father and I — and later your mother — were meant to live forever, without change or decay, in an earthly utopia — the Garden of Eden. Things didn't work out quite as well as your parents might have wished since they were soon forced to become mortals.

"As you have probably figured out by now, I didn't have the same fate."

I was hedging a bit here. No use in being too specific.

"And you were the first true earthling, born of flesh and blood, solely of human parents."

"How did I come to be raised by you, if you're not human?"

"That I can't tell you."

"Why not? Who's stopping you?"

I laughed. "Nobody could stop me," I boasted. "But your father wouldn't like it. He was the one who laid the curse on me, the curse of raising you."

He had never asked me about his father; he had just assumed that there didn't need to be one. Or that the Most Holy One was Father enough for everyone. He had never known any father but Him.

"My father? God?"

I shook my head.

"Who is my father then? Who are you talking about?"

The threads of the puzzle were pulling in, tightening, beginning to enmesh him. That was when I gave up my teasing. I

told him about the man who was his immediate progenitor, and about his mother, too. I explained that he was mortal, just as they were, and described what that meant. It meant being short-lived and bound to the surface of the earth, exiled from its waters and its skies, slaves to existence and conscience, subject to death, disease and natural catastrophe, perpetual laborers without hope of redemption or change.

Being mortal meant all these things.

"Why?" he wondered. "Why did He set us up that way? It sounds awful."

"Ask Him," I laughed maliciously. "You are fiefs of a God who is as capricious as He is all-powerful."

It was not a cheerful tale, but then I didn't intend it to be. It made me smile to see his eyes widen as he listened, his breath catch with astonishment. I was introducing him to a new world, a narrow, short, difficult one — the world of humanity and all the life competing within it, surrounding, contesting and, yes, I suppose supporting it, too. His universe, his reality. Learning about his inheritance was giving him considerable anxiety. I could see that. It pleased me. The process of teaching that knowledge to him provided me with marrow-deep satisfaction. I'd waited a long time for that opportunity.

I may have left a few things out, some things that humans might have considered worthwhile, but everything I said was true, wasn't it? I could only give him a synopsis that afternoon; the rest I filled in later.

"That's what your parents were. And that's what you are."

"So my parents are some of those humans you've warned me about?"

"Yes, they are. There're many more of them than you know, too. Your age and another generation born after you. You have lots of brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews. That woman you helped the other day was one of your sisters."

Then I told him about the first two brothers, the one who had been killed named Abel and the one, Cain, who had been

banished by the Everlasting Lord for the deliberate killing. I even told him that Cain was a half-brother of his, the son of Adam and me. It was all so new to him, so confusing, that he couldn't sort out his feelings on the spot. What was this family he'd never heard of? Who were these people?

"Tell me my parents' names."

"Adam and Eve."

"And are they still living? Do you know them?"

"Yes. I know them, but your mother doesn't know me."

He didn't ask me why.

"Do either of them ever wonder about me? Can I find them if I go looking?"

All those questions! I knew the answers. Yes, there was more to tell, but at first I wasn't going to give him all of it. I thought that I'd better continue some parts of my contract with Adam, even though Isaac had grown up. As it was I was taking considerable risk. Isaac hadn't left as soon, as young, as I would have liked, but I hadn't forced the issue. There was no sense in generating unnecessary trouble for myself.

I had gone on keeping track of Adam and Eve. Over the last few years I had even dropped in on Adam every now and then just to say "Hello" and to revive the memories of earlier, better, times. He had grown older and didn't miss me. In fact, he wasn't at all happy to have me show up. I was a reminder of a complicated aspect of his life, one which he would rather have forgotten. He had even learned to admit feeling guilty about his past — his sexual history with me — since his relationship with Eve had matured into friendship.

In a little while I'll tell you about the last time I saw him. But, for now, back to my conversation with Isaac. About his kin.

What the Hell, I decided finally, feeling quite Devil-may-care, looking at the full-grown man standing before me petitioning for answers. There had to be some recourse, some hope for liberation from his constant attention. I had only promised to look after him until he reached adulthood. By then, he was

well into maturity and yet he still clung to my side. Perhaps the time had come to rid myself of this nuisance. Besides, I'd always wanted to tell Eve about the trick her husband and I had played on her so many years ago. It wasn't half the fun it could have been without her knowing I'd planned it — and that Adam had agreed. Perhaps this was the hour.

I decided that I would help Isaac find his parents. By doing so, I would reap two benefits for myself: first, Eve would learn about the way I had outwitted her by secretly swapping our sons and second, I would be disengaged from this insufferable burden. I would return the son to his mother. He could tag after her. I would be free again.

The more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. Telling Eve the truth would complete my victory. I even planned to tell her that it was I who had been the Serpent in the Garden of Eden, I who had set the stage on which her own weakness had brought her downfall. And Adam's. She could blame me if she wanted to. I didn't care. But none of what happened was my fault. The Almighty Lord knew that. I hadn't forced them into anything, only excited their interest, presented the opportunity and hoped that they'd fall. Yielding to temptation, reacting emotionally, the pair had only themselves to blame. They were the sinners, the ill-doers and law-breakers, not I. As Adam had grown so fond of saying over the years, they both had had the free will to choose for themselves.

They should have known that, when reason sleeps and feelings awaken, demons emerge. These moments provide easy targets of opportunity for us since feelings are our area of expertise, our field of efficiency.

I wondered whether, if Adam saw us coming, he would try to stop me. There was no way to find out in advance.

So, taking Isaac with me, I went looking for the woman, thinking I'd find her where I had last seen Adam. The two had become inseparable in old age, intertwined with the branches of their ever-expanding family tree and their devotion to the

Lord on High. I didn't feel any pressure to hurry. I took my time, entertaining myself along the way, dawdling, so that by the time I had found them some months had gone by and the situation had changed.

Adam was dead.

CHAPTER 10

Throughout their lives together Eve had never ceased longing for "home" — the halcyon world of the Garden of Eden. During the early years of exile, when the contrasts of their present lives to the Golden Age of the past were particularly acute, Adam kept reminding her that they had no right to complain. They had been given free will and they had used it. True, they were amateurs playing the professionals' game, ignorant of the penalties following rule-breaking, but since their ouster was their own fault, her husband thought that she ought to give up her homesick dreams and be more realistic.

His Grand Majesty had given them the power to choose, but He hadn't liked their choice once they'd made it. Perhaps being disobedient that way had been naughty, but surely it hadn't been wicked. No one has been injured. Privately, Adam felt that the punishment outweighed the crime, but he wasn't telling his wife that. What he knew, and she had to come to accept, was

the fact that there was no real chance that they could ever get to go back.

Until they died. Adam was sure that, when they were reunited with God, Heaven would turn out to be another Garden of Eden. A more enduring one, not subject to the vagaries of human weakness, of curiosity, nor punishment for mere misadventure. It would be one that lasted throughout eternity, one where goodness was taken for granted and no more testing was required.

As they had aged, he nagged his wife less and less. It seemed less important to him to prove that he was a being superior to Eve. Together, they began to learn what forms of real satisfaction were available to them in their imperfect environment on earth and they took advantage of them. Eve learned to season their food with the herbs and spices she gathered and dried to use throughout the year; she learned to sew, using a bone needle, and as time went by, with Adam's help, she constructed a simple loom and began to weave the grasses and fibers which she gathered.

When the weather was stormy or cold, instead of Adam's hunting fresh meat, they ate from their stored resources, dried or salted food. On those days sometimes he used his imagination to construct tools which made an easier job of the work which both he and Eve had to do to sustain their family life. Sometimes he did what he most enjoyed: applied soft clays to the walls of their caves, painting pictures of their mundane world, making a record of the animals and plants with whom they shared space on the planet, and decorating their home.

These activities, and many more, became sources of pleasure for them both, but one in particular dominated the lives they shared: the growing ties with their children and with each other.

As I said earlier, I had been to visit Adam from time to time during those years, not really wanting to renew our special relationship but curious to see if my unchanging beauty, my sexual aura, still held him bound. The last time I went to see

him he had seemed glad that I'd come. He welcomed me, but as an old friend. He wanted to talk, not to enjoy himself with me physically.

At that time I didn't care at all for long conversations, even "love talk" or "pillow talk" or whatever you want to call it. ("Pillow talk" came later. We never used what today people would call "pillows," only the yielding shapes provided by nature.) My spirit didn't appreciate that kind of stroking; there wasn't enough excitement in it. The conversation Adam was offering me wasn't intimate; it was neither flattery nor erotic play. In fact, it was more an objective historical review: "Remember when ... ?" He just wanted me to corroborate his own memories. That sort of thing. I wasn't amused.

When I teased him about the change — lust turned into verbosity, desire into loquacity — he proved the truth of what I was saying: his response was a lengthy, pompous lecture. I wouldn't have minded so much if at least part of his talk had been a different kind of reminiscence, a remembering of the hot times we'd had together, our sexual inventiveness and our shared discoveries, but it wasn't. He just wanted to get the facts in order and then to complain and to brag. First, to blame God the Father for the difficulties he'd encountered since the banishment from Eden; second, to recite all the ways in which he felt he'd gotten around the impediments forming barriers around him. He felt that he had succeeded on his own. I'll give you an idea of the sort of thing he said when he finally got around to talking about our relationship.

"I'm a mature man now, Lilith, not the young hotblood I once was. I know my sexual tempo has slowed. I have less appetite than I used to have and it takes me longer to come to a close." He used that polite word "appetite" instead of the one he really meant — as if he were talking to Eve, not me. The innocent was out of earshot. "But I can't complain. That must be the way the Almighty Lord intended it to be with mortals since He gave us such a limited lifespan. That hasn't happened

to you, has it?" (He surely knew better than to expect me to say "Yes." There was more than a slight taint of jealousy in that question.) "All our physical forces gradually weaken. We wind down, wear out."

How could he possibly think he was telling me anything new! Those fragile humans are all alike that way. Their force weakens and their flesh decays.

If he had stopped his explanations there, we would still have parted on reasonably good terms. But he didn't.

"Those aren't the only things that have changed. It hasn't all been negative. In fact, in some ways I've become strengthened and some things have gotten better. I'm more relaxed now, for instance. I don't feel that I have to strive to become something I'm not, something better than I really am. Somehow the rules of the game have softened. They don't seem to be so hard and fast. I've become easier on myself and I do believe that He has, too."

I'll skip the tedious description of what else he thought had improved in the course of aging and just get to the close of the monologue. This is how he ended, with this declaration:

"I know myself better than I used to, as well, and one of the important things I've come to know is that it's Eve I want to be with. We've shared so much; we have so much in common — breaking bread together, working the soil, raising our children, and praising God." He went on and on until, worn out by this repetitious, mawkish drivel, I stopped listening. But long before he came to the end of this speech, one thing was clear.

It was Eve he desired, not me. No, not desired, not physically. I didn't believe that she was any great sexual attraction, especially as she was getting older. He just wanted to be with her, to share his thoughts and feelings with her, in every other way possible. That was what he was saying over and over again. *Ad infinitum. Ad nauseam.*

The straight, sharp meaning of his words struck the target within.

He was rejecting me. The presumptuous man! He didn't realize that it was I who had put an end to our long affair. It was never in his power to do that alone; I had to want it to happen or it wouldn't have. After I had made my unilateral decision, he was the one who had been forced to accept it. And yet the fool thought he had a choice in the matter! A hot flush of temper rose through my lower body. I was bursting into flame, fire climbing from my toes to my waist in wild licks of orange and red, blues and gold. Anger had created a spontaneous combustion. Alarmed, Adam hastily stepped back two paces.

I wasn't doing it on purpose to frighten him. Rage — all by itself — had made it happen. But if he were scared, that was fine. At that moment all I could think about was how much I wanted to get even before I left him for good, abandoned him forever. Vivid images of torture flashed through my mind's eye, none very practical. As I began to cool down, Adam stayed warily at a distance.

I was thinking rapidly, chaotically. Whatever I did should be done my way, with my design. Should I become a serpent again and invade his body as I had Eve's that day, so many years before? There in the violated, the desecrated, the Unholy Garden of Eden? I had never raped him. Until now he had always been more than willing; he had been eager to assault and be assaulted. It had been his pleasure to be with me. If he had become impotent, I could have forgiven him. But he wasn't, not yet. He just didn't want me any more. My fires, internal and external, had not burnt low; I still had all the energy, all the lust, given to me at my creation. But he didn't want me!

Brave words. Extraordinary words. Foolish, insulting words!

I would ruin him; I would destroy him. Not entirely, but enough that no one else, especially not Eve, would want any part of him.

In the heat of anger, those were my thoughts, rabid and confused. They lasted only a few moments. As my fires were quenched, things became clearer and I changed my mind.

Actually, I had no need for gross revenge; subtle methods could be more painful. It occurred to me that I didn't need to touch him physically, to assault him; I could humiliate him more easily, more thoroughly, in another way. I could tell him something he didn't know about his wife, the wife he thought he had created, whom he had educated, the person shaped by his own design, his own making — with the Good Lord's Help, of course. The person he believed was as accessible and transparent as the functions of his own body, his own mind.

I could tell him the secret that Eve had kept from him all those years, all that time when he thought he knew her essence, every ingredient, every thought and thread, every particle of which she was constructed.

You remember what that was, of course. The one secret she had kept from him. It was what happened while she was eating the apple when I, the Serpent in the Garden of Eden, took her from the rear without her consent, invading. She had been humiliated, furious, but so avid for that forbidden treat, so focused and intent, that she didn't even try to counter my attack. Afterward, when the fruit was gone, she who had never mistreated a person or threatened an animal in her life, had tried to injure me, the Serpent. Along with humiliation, she had learned something she wasn't admitting, something about the complex workings of her body, something that interested her and that she had kept to herself — at least so far — for the rest of her life.

At the time, Adam would have been angry and blamed her if she had told him what happened that day. What would he do if I told him now?

Eve had never learned who that Serpent was, but Adam had. I hoped the knowledge of the act would scar him, would send him away enraged both at what I had done and at the deception, his wife's concealment. Surely he would want to punish her, perhaps even to abandon her. That would be the best of blows. He would be doing my pleasurable work for me.

My musings didn't end there. Next, I considered whether I should strike at them both. Go tell her myself after I'd finished with Adam. No, that wasn't necessary. I went back to the earlier plan, elaborating on it. I would get Adam to punish her for me. He wouldn't be able to keep his outrage to himself; he'd go and confront her. It would be all the more upsetting coming from him — because he had learned from me what had happened but, even more galling, because it was I who had defiled her.

A good plan — a clever, multi-purpose one — but one of the few in my long lifetime that didn't work out. Impassive, not trying to run off, to avoid, or even to stop me when I spoke to him, Adam listened. He heard me out — words, sneers and gloating — watched my salacious, graphic gestures until I paused at the end of the story. Even then he didn't react at all the way I had expected. The stonewall face, the blank eyes, never changed; he didn't acknowledge my message, didn't respond to me. That day never a word was said on the subject and over the rest of his lifetime he never told Eve what he had learned.

The sober sense of maturity! I was disappointed — disgusted, in fact, though not really defeated, but that is when I went away and left him to Eve for so many years. Looking at him later in old age, flabby and wrinkled, his skin rough, bumpy and discolored, it was hard for me to imagine that we had been lovers. The man who had excited me, whom I had satisfied so thoroughly yet still left insatiable, had disappeared into the dry desert of that worn-out body. By then Eve was welcome to him. All of him.

But "love" it seemed — that diffuse, over-loaded concept — was turning out to have a reality for them that extended beyond the flesh. As their time was running out, they spent more of it together. They enjoyed each other's company more, talking deeply and openly about what was important to them both and reminiscing about their tangled past. Even about the pain that I had caused Eve when she discovered her husband's infidelity.

They didn't argue anymore. Adam had grown softer, more accommodating. He didn't feel that he had to confront or control her as much as he had in the past. He took what she said more seriously, respected her more.

Eve had learned to change the subject skillfully when she didn't agree with what he was saying. By then she knew his weaknesses and that she loved him, the whole man.

"What will I do if you die before I do?" Eve questioned her husband one evening after they had shared a peaceful meal. "Even with all the children and grandchildren, I'll be so alone." She had certainly changed her mind since those early days — that quarrelsome, resentful period — when she had kicked him out. Then she'd been happy to be rid of him, to be spared any part of his presence. As they grew older, the scales of affection, of worth, became more balanced. I valued him less and less while she valued him more and more.

There was another worry that kept recurring in her mind. Eve didn't think that Adam could survive, let alone be content, without her. Those last years he had rarely left her side. As he grew weaker, he grew more dependent. Without telling him, she began to pray silently that the Almighty would take both of them at the same time.

Adam was wondering, too, how he would manage without her but, even then, he wasn't able to admit his needs aloud, or even clearly, inwardly, to himself. Instead, he began to ponder, to see whether he could come up with a solution to the separation that loomed, black and forbidding in its emptiness, just ahead for them.

Still God's surrogate, he found a new form of solace for them both.

In his mind Heaven, where God and the angels dwelt in perpetuity, began to assume a new shape and a new meaning. He decided that the Almighty had created life on earth simply as a brief interim, that humans, too, were meant to be immortal — not in their temporary flesh but in an ethereal form bestowed

upon them after death. You see, he built an image based on hope, an image of a never-ending life yet to come, an even grander Garden of Eden located in Paradise and inhabited by the best sort of people. His people.

Perfection was not possible and therefore not demanded, but only the good, the servants of the Lord, would be admitted. Those who had believed in Him and served God on earth by doing appropriate works and supporting worthy causes would be allowed His company in Heaven.

As I've reported it, that doesn't sound like such a great reward for so much effort, does it. For doing without all the things that make life on earth exciting and enjoyable. But I haven't told you what was written in fine print, the footnote that made it all worth having. Adam had put in some positive reinforcement, not just for himself and Eve, but for all the younger members of the family whose intermittent waywardness was not always easy to control.

What could be more motivating than the promise of sharing neighborhood space, through infinity, with the Immortal Himself? For mortals, only one other promise. It was that, under Adam's plan, those whom humans had loved during their lifetime would be with them there in Heaven. If they were the proper sort, of course: good, pious people. It was the company of the beloved — and not the opportunity to be with the abstract Almighty — which made Heaven seem an attractive bargain, one that was worth the effort.

Adam had grown weaker and weaker and finally, one morning, he awoke with no intention of getting up. Eve had brought him some food, had seated herself at his side to feed him if he wanted her to, but he had refused the offering. Why waste their resources? He had no need for nourishment on the journey he was taking.

"Eve," he had murmured, groping for her hand. "Don't grieve. I'm tired and glad to be going. Especially since you'll be

joining me soon in Paradise. We'll both be young again and we'll start all over. Together. I know it's so."

He did believe that it was so. He had told her that at least a dozen times before. She had heard it over and over again; so had I. But this time was different. This time Eve knew that she wouldn't be hearing that message again — at least, not in this life. Closing his eyes for the last time, Adam gave a deep sigh, opened his mouth, and expelled his life's breath. The heaving chest relaxed. It seemed to his wife, sitting there beside him, watching, that his departing spirit was visible, palpable, rising from the passage in his throat to enter the larger cosmos. She believed that she was witnessing its emergence from the temporary, its union with the eternal.

Notice that his concern at that hour was his wife, not his relationship with the Divine. Adam had settled that long since, setting up the religion I've already told you about. Over the years that religion had solidified into a fixed liturgy. It had become a routine enacted, and often led, by others — one which had no longer occupied the full course of his existence, his every effort. As time went by, the duties he performed as a rabbi had become briefer, symbolic ones. He had stopped composing, but he still recited and sang the works he had originated and which had become a part of the ritual of the institution he had founded.

Eve buried Adam's cold, hard shell at low tide in one of the inlets of ocean water. He had grown thin during his last days, but still the task was not an easy one. Two of their sons helped her to transport the body and to dig a shallow cavity in the wet earth. Then she had sent them away, wanting herself to cover his remains, to do it slowly, deliberately, with small handfuls of saltwater mud. She could neither think nor mourn with others around. Anticipation of her loss had not prepared her for this numbness, the emptiness that she was experiencing.

Would she ever be whole again? Healthy and happy? Tied so tightly to the past, planless, the future unimaginable, what

was she going to do in the time left to her? Those were her thoughts. The fullness of existence had become vacuity. The core, the center, was gone.

I tell you, strange as it seems, that's what happens with human love — when the ties that bind are cut and the remaining partner is left adrift. She was in trouble, trouble she had expected, ordinary trouble with nothing to be done about it. There is pain built into the system, isn't there? Planned pain, pain drawn up by the Universal Architect.

Anyway, it was there on the beach that I found her, mourning, and there that I left Isaac whom I had carried for the last time on my back, between my wings. I had no reason to have anything more to do with either of them. There was no point in heaping coals on a dead fire, was there?

As we circled in, I made my parting remarks to Isaac.

"We're too late. Your father's gone. To his reward, as he liked to say, since he expected one. But that's your mother," I told him, crudely pointing to the bent figure. Eve was squatting in the mud, motionless, pausing for a moment to dwell on her sorrows before she went on with her labors. "You can tell her the whole story. What I've told you. She won't have any trouble believing it. She never really accepted Cain as her son, even when she thought he had to be. Tell her he wasn't and she'll be happy."

We landed some distance away on pale sand wildly overgrown, patched with fresh seaweed and driftwood seasoned by sun and salt air. The tide was beginning to come in, its shallow waves rolling persistently, unevenly, one after another, curling over the edges of the beach. Soon Adam's grave would be under water as well as underground.

I stayed behind, out of sight, while Isaac walked toward the lone worker. She had straightened up, expectantly, as she watched him coming, standing there holding her dirty hands out at her sides to keep from smearing the mud on her clothes. Her feet were already edged by the returning waters. Perhaps

she had intended to stay there, to sleep beside her cold spouse in the tidal river.

I didn't say a formal "Goodbye" to Isaac or any "Goodbyes" at all. Who's to say? Perhaps I thought that we'd meet again. I wasn't looking forward to it. By that time, I don't think he was either. The false ties of an unearned loyalty had been broken.

And then I left the two of them there together, looking at each other curiously, as strangers must, and the last thing I heard as I soared skyward was Isaac's husky voice. "Mother!" he was saying. "Mother!" He was putting his arms around her, there in the wind and the water. I couldn't hear her reply, but she didn't brush him off. In that moment she had learned that he was hers, that she would not be staying, straying into the partnership of death, that she had been recalled to life.

Now she would have to cope with him ... I laughed, but they didn't hear me.

Freed at last, I flew farther that day than I had for a long time, following the contours of the earth as it curved into space. I never go too high. I had done that just once, years before, and been rewarded with a warning crack of lightning. Eternal vigilance is the price of privacy in Heaven. Swooping in and out of soft cumulus clouds, I didn't look back. At first my movements, random and ecstatic as they were, were only self- expression, the relaxation of pent-up, long-term, repressed emotion. How released and light I felt! Then, almost by itself, the pace steadied and slowed, became more constant. My wings were not tiring, but something was changing. I began to realize that I was actively looking, that I was searching for something myself, some unfinished business that had to be tidied up before I could go home to you here below.

Seeing Isaac with Eve, son with mother, had put me in mind of Cain, my son. I hadn't missed him, but now I was curious. Where was he? Who, in the long run, with his mixture of human and demon, his crossbreeding, had he turned out to be? When I had seen him last, there had been no others like him.

Were there now? Had he been producing his own young? Had the Almighty mated any of my demon offspring with humans? And produced more crossbreeds? At that time I didn't know of any others.

When I found Cain, it was at the opening of a new act in his domestic drama. By then the two of them had been married for several years.

CHAPTER 11

Although I hadn't paid much attention to my half-breed son during those two years, I had stored the events of his life as they happened. They were readily available to me — easily called up — but what I really wanted, I realized once I had Isaac off my hands, was to see him again, to catch up on his current doings in person. It was not hard to find that mismatched pair and, when I did, I hovered in the air, invisible and silent, while I listened in.

"Cain," his wife Mary was asking, staring at her husband that bright morning. "What is happening? That bruise on your face is growing bigger and darker."

It was the last day of the week, the day that His Most Holy Self has designated for respite, for a lull in the endless labor for survival, and for focus on the connection between mortal and God, daily life and the hope for heavenly succor and eternal bliss.

Although he happened to be at home that morning, Cain was neither resting nor communing with the Eternal. God was an unwanted intrusion in his life, one that, maintaining a studied neutrality, he tried hard to avoid. I already knew the Sabbath had never been a day of worship for him. Nor was it one particularly set aside for relaxation; he traveled just as far, hunting, on that day as he did on the other six. Hunting was his idea of rest and recreation, partly because it was the opportunity to be left alone, not to be bothered by other people.

Even when he stayed at home, it wasn't for company. It was just the place where he kept most of his tools and didn't have to cook his own meals. He had no human companions other than Mary, and Mary he wanted going about her own business, out of sound range, even out of sight. He didn't care what she did as long as it didn't interfere with him, as long as she was available to him when he desired her.

What he wanted most when he was home was a chance to plot and plan alone, to work with the materials of the earth: rock, soil, plants — especially their vines and woods — and animals, each with its own characteristics, to see what his ingenious mind could devise of them. Given a chance, he could find a use for anything, for any combination of things. For example, when his wife spoke to him, he had just had the idea of a pulley and was bending over a patch of bare ground, sketching out its design with a stick in the loose dirt.

It was autumn, that day when Mary asked her question, and there was a high wind lifting and lulling, stilling and quickening, in its alternate vigorous spurts stirring up and transporting all that was dry and movable. The great shock of thick, coarse hair that usually covered Cain's forehead was in turmoil, swept upward and aside in revealing chaos. She couldn't remember when she had last seen so much of her husband's face.

I knew what he was thinking after she asked her question. He was addressing Him silently, asking why Mary couldn't mind her own business. He didn't believe that there was anything

changed on his face, that the same mark placed by His Grand Condemning Hand still remained, the same brand still burnt in.

He tried his best to ignore her, but she persisted, moving in to take a closer look.

"Does it hurt?"

"I'm busy," he muttered finally, lifting his head only enough to look sideways in the direction opposite from where she stood. "Go away for now. Maybe I'll tell you some other time." He brushed the mass down over his forehead where it lingered only briefly.

It was silly of her to ask. He had no intention of telling her anything about his mark, then or any other time. She wasn't happy turned away like that, but then Cain already knew that she rarely was. Her cheerful nature was being eroded away. He didn't care. The marriage was made to his shaping — not all she had hoped it would be. In fact, it was hardly anything like what she'd thought it could be. Her own parents had some differences but, all in all, they were a happy pair. Their only lasting problem was that they had had too many children, too many little ones to feed or even to keep track of them all.

Mary had been lonely in that crowd and had wanted a family of her own, a husband who would have time and energy to attend to her, to be company for her. And, later, give her children to raise. Not so many that the family wouldn't prosper, just enough to have her home filled with activity and laughter, to share labor and pleasures.

She hadn't met Cain in the usual way, among the village children she had grown up with. One day he had just appeared, all by himself. Later during the same week she had come across him two or three times while she was running errands for her mother. Strangers stood out in that sparsely populated country. He was always alone and always idle, as if he were waiting for something to happen or for someone to turn up. The last time she'd seen him before things changed he had been sitting

cross-legged, crushing the high, wild grasses under his muscled body, not far from the path to the milking area. He had been hidden, quite invisible, and suddenly moved forward, parting the greenery so that, before she recognized him, she had stumbled and almost fallen.

When she recovered, her cheerful "Hello" fell on deaf ears; he hadn't greeted her.

After they were married and she was trying to recall how it had all begun, she remembered thinking that he had been staring at her, examining her with cold eyes, as if she were an animal he was planning to acquire in trade. Not one he was planning to kill. It seemed to her that there had been no malevolence in the look. It had been as if he had it in mind to put her to some special use and he wanted to be sure he was figuring out as close as he could just how much she'd be worth to him. She had turned her head quickly from those steady eyes and gone on, but a few paces later had looked back over her shoulder to see if he were still looking after her. He was — with a steadfast, direct gaze holding nothing of welcome, appeal or curiosity in it.

Nothing that invited speech or approach. Nothing that even elicited recognition.

That had been the beginning, a cold forewarning of the future, but, of course, she hadn't recognized it then. She had never known such a solitary, self-contained man. A man apart from family and friends, without the usual ties.

I could have told her what she was in for, but it was much more entertaining just to let things take their course, to watch her version of reality become modified as it collided with his.

Well, to go on with the story of that first meeting ...

Mary had been back in the main cave just a few minutes when Cain arrived, headed right for her father, Ezra, who was sitting by the cook-fire in the open area, pounding a stiff skin into softness.

"I'm Ezekiel from Bakar," he had growled in his usual straightforward way, as soon as he was within the father's hearing. "And I've come for that one." He had pointed over to the corner where she stood.

Setting down his stone tool, the father had looked up at the intruder. "You are well come," he said courteously and waited in silence to hear more. Like Mary, he had seen this man a number of times, but he didn't know him. What was the outlander demanding, expecting to get without attention to manners, to the conventional greetings, the courteous timing, the appropriate delays?

"Let's not waste time," Cain had gone on, breaking the expectant silence, impatiently gesturing in the air. "I've looked all over. You've got so many children you'll never miss one. For quite a while now I've been keeping an eye on her and she looks strong and healthy to me. I'll take that female off your hands. One less mouth to feed. You'll be glad it happened, I guarantee it."

That was the longest speech he had ever made, my son. As a bystander listening and observing unseen, I thought it was a good one. Succinct and to the point. As it turned out, though, it wasn't quite enough.

When Cain paused, Ezra had picked up the stone tool from the spot where he'd laid it and, without making response, had gone on with his pounding. Seeing that he was being ignored, the stranger changed his tactics. He squatted by the fire at Ezra's side and, after a few moments of warming silence, began again in a less demanding way. He didn't know the customs of the community he had wandered into, but he had taken the hint and talked on more quietly, more obliquely, about his purpose and his background, his antecedents, property and connections. Soon he was beginning to lie systematically about who he was and what he owned in his own country. In a few short sentences he made himself out to be a wealthy man with an accumulation of resources in livestock, mostly sheep and goats.

Was he doing anything he shouldn't have done? Of course not. From my point of view, he was just being practical. He needed a mate and he set out to get one the best way he could. He didn't have any reason to look after Ezra's interests. What he needed to do was to look after his own.

Those who can be cheated deserve to be; those who can cheat well deserve to prosper.

As I'm sure you've noticed, Cain hadn't given his right name or told Ezra that he was the son of Adam and Eve. He probably thought that, by then, everyone on earth, wherever they lived, knew the story of Abel and Cain.

I remember that, at first, Ezra had appeared startled at the intruder's abruptness. He had hidden his reaction behind his return to work. Not that he'd been unhappy at the request. Especially when he had heard about all the acquisitions, the material goods and animals, that Cain claimed to have. Soon the father began to believe that Mary would be better off if she went with him. How could any of them lose if she were taken care of, found a companion to work with, and he got something for his remaining family in the exchange? Mary was the oldest of the flock, a spinster lately turned fifteen, and he had already begun thinking, tentatively, with some reluctance, about when she might find a partner and be gone. One less mouth to feed.

He believed that he loved his daughter and he wished her well, but the fact was that there were just too many of his children, too many so young that they couldn't earn their keep. Only a very few minutes passed before Cain's generous offer started to appeal to him.

When the newcomer had finished his bragging and brought his speech to a close, the father hadn't waited to talk to Mary in private or to consult his wife, the girl's mother. Right away he had turned to his daughter and asked, "Would you like to marry this man? Work with him instead of your mother and me? Go live elsewhere and have your own home?"

With the authority he held over his children, I wouldn't have put it that way. But Ezra was an unusual parent for the time; he was asking, not ordering. He would not have forced Mary to accept, but he would have been sorry if she hadn't. When he put these questions to her, the father deliberately made Cain's offer sound as positive as he could. Perhaps if she had refused, he would have asserted himself and insisted. As it happened, there was no need for that.

Confused and nervous, Mary had felt her blood begin to pump more and more strongly as Cain talked on. Her heart's action had taken a spurt; she could hear every beat pounding within her ears. Probably she thought the two men waiting for her answer could hear it, too. The noise was reverberating against the walls of the cave. She had had her chance to speak then, and she had known it, but she hadn't said anything. Certainly she hadn't objected — because she hadn't wanted to do anything of the kind. At that time her strongest emotion had been curiosity. She had waited to see what would happen next, glad to be the center of attention for once.

As was usually the case with him, Ezra took her silence for consent. While time went by and she continued to stand there, speechless, his questioning look had melted into a pleased smile. He had turned back to Cain and begun to discuss the terms for acceptance.

"And what are you offering for this daughter of mine?"

A poor man, the father didn't have high expectations about what he could get from anyone who wanted his child. He tried to avoid being presumptuous and so, although this foreigner had presented himself as wealthy, he didn't ask for much. That was fortunate for Ezra, I say, because, for all his bragging and the good show he put on, Cain didn't have much. He lived by his wits, daily, and did not accumulate. Even most of his own inventions were abandoned over time. The arrangements, fraudulent and laden with pretense as they were, were soon concluded. When it was so quickly settled and all was done,

another smile had come to the deceived father's face. He gave a deep sigh of relief.

As for the suitor, anyone who knew him the way I did would have expected just what I did — that he'd concentrate on completing the bargain he'd initiated and leave the niceties of how to fulfill it to take care of themselves. He was single-minded, after just one thing at that time: the young woman. He'd have offered anything he needed to, whatever was requested or demanded, in order to get her. What did it matter if he didn't have what was expected, what he had promised? He got what he wanted.

Cain's neutral expression had been cast in iron throughout the whole enterprise; it did not change. He was never one to expose his feelings; they were nobody's business but his. Mary never got used to that. He was always an alien, an unknown, a stranger withdrawn and retracted into his secret, protected source. Eventually, since he remained inaccessible to her, she found a part in the natural, outside world for herself, a place warmer, more populated, beyond the blank wall of her husband's face, the closed protectorate of his heart.

Once the bargain was concluded, Cain had wanted no delay. He had taken Mary away the day after his offer had been accepted. Before he left, he gave her father two sheep as a token of the agreement, promising to deliver the others later, along with a breeding pair of goats. Mary hadn't at all minded leaving so suddenly. In fact, she was anxious to get going. Once they were alone, she could make him smile. She was sure of it. After all, she was a happy woman who had brought smiles to many a face, both female and male, just by her joyous disposition. That was the way she thought of herself.

Good luck shows itself through a sunny face and, when the arrangements were being made, she had thought that they were both lucky. She was because she could get away from anonymous, crowded living into an exciting new life. Her bridegroom was lucky because he was ugly and fierce and a foreigner to these

parts, and yet he had found a young bride. She speculated as to why he had traveled so far in his search and decided that she knew the answer. Finding a woman who would have him — especially a young one and a pretty one — wouldn't have been easy for him under the best of circumstances. Maybe it would have been even harder at home. Wherever his home was.

I'm telling you what it was that *she* had thought. My own thoughts were quite different. I thought he could have had anyone he wanted, although why he wanted an earthling I will never understand. Probably it was just that, believing he was human, he thought that was all that was available to him.

I certainly wasn't happy mated to a mortal. Why should he be?

While she had known she'd miss her mother, Mary had expected to find affection elsewhere when she was grown up. She thought she'd find it in this new partnership. Much too young she had been, when she met him, to recognize a man whose world was centered away from her and where you and I know it should be: on himself.

What fools these mortals be! They don't recognize the value of autonomy, of actual independence. They build a fantasy world of sharing and caring, a flimsy thing of crumbling stone and rotten wood, and are crushed when they try to dwell in it, to put it to use. Because the foundations themselves are imaginary, they fail. There is no structure in what they've built that can stand to be tested. There is nothing permanent or dependable in place at all.

Now, you and I both know that Cain was some of the things she'd hoped he'd be. He was an older man, strong-minded and healthy, a good provider when he chose to be. But he wasn't, by any means, all those inconsequential things she believed she wanted. Mary hadn't seen enough of him to know what was there and what wasn't. Not that appearances were deceiving; they weren't. For her, that was just the trouble. Her first impressions had been accurate ones, but she hadn't believed

them. Right away she should have given up expecting anything else of him, anything other than what she had already seen.

As it turned out, it wasn't very long before she had realized that she didn't like much about Cain, her new mate. She had been gathering early berries one day, enjoying sucking the deep red juices that stained her fingers as she reached through the brambles, when the thought first came to her. Its sourness contrasted with the sweetness she was tasting. Right away she tried to change the subject in her mind but it was not to be banished and, by the time her woven twig basket was full of the fruit, she had accepted the truth: her new husband neither gave love nor wanted it from her.

He had been completely consistent, right from the start of that long trek away from her home. As time went on, the small incidents began to multiply and form a pattern in her memory. Her suspicions had grown apace when she called him "Ezekiel" and he hadn't responded. When she said it again, he had answered, "Call me 'Cain.'" Cain? Cain? Was it an honest man who had two names? Who was this man? This 'Ezekiel/Cain?'"

Then, of course, she discovered that he didn't have the sheep and goats to fulfill his bargain with her father. He'd never had any flock at all, never any intention of getting one. Of his own. The two sheep he had given to Ezra as a first installment of the promised payment had been stolen. Which accounted for the haste with which he had wanted to close the marriage bargain and be on his way. Once they were gone, what would it matter to him if there were an angry shepherd roaming the meadows, looking for the thief? Perhaps he would recognize the two additions to Ezra's flock. Cain laughed to himself when he pictured their encounter. Beyond a doubt, there would be name-calling and a scuffle before the truth came out.

He had been far away by then. With his loot, his prize, and no intention of ever returning to that part of the world. Forever the hunter, never a shepherd, what he had always had in mind

for the future was not settlement but movement, new grounds and new prey. The nomadic life.

Perhaps most disappointing to Mary was the fact that he had turned out to be no company at all except for the physical coupling. And there had never been any of her choice in that. The first time had been on that nuptial journey, not a league from her family's home, before they had traveled together for half a day. They had been passing under the sheltering spread of an oak tree when, without a word of warning, he had stopped where he was. Bending his great frame over her, he had loosened the load she was carrying on her back, the few household treasures she had brought from home. In a fumbling way, she had tried to help him undo the package.

"Don't bother!" he had exclaimed impatiently, brushing her hands away. He wanted no interference, no complicating delay. Cain had been ready for her, charged for the act, before they had left her parents' cave.

Naive she was, that young one. Even then she didn't know what he had in mind. For a brief moment she had thought that he was going to carry her burden himself, to relieve her of its weight for a while, but no, when it was free, he had dropped the package to the ground below. Then he had put his arms around her and pulled her roughly with him to the thin grass covering. He didn't bother to remove his clothing or give her time to take her own off herself. He just pushed it out of the way and went right to the secret entrances of her body. Like much of what followed in their life together, it was not at all what Mary had expected.

She had expected pleasure within both mind and body, a joyful experience, personal knowledge shared, mutual comfort acknowledged. At home, when her mother had sung at her chores during the day, the daughter had thought the glad outpouring must have come from a reservoir of marital love shared the night before. So Mary had anticipated gratification of many kinds. She had gotten none, certainly no rapture, no

sense of loving, no warm contact, not even the simplest sensual enjoyment. After his own rapid ejaculation he had pulled out, leaving her excited, frustrated, aware of her genitals' incomplete response. It was all too shallow, too meaningless, too impersonal and, besides all that, over too fast even to satisfy the physical body.

Her body had not had time to prepare for invasion, had been entered before a prelude had been attempted, yet alone completed. Tense, wary, she had cooled, not heated, with contact; contracted, not expanded, under such sudden, antagonistic touch. It had all been done too rapidly, she thought. What she had felt was mostly pain — sheer, dry pain — followed by amazement at the mess, the gooey wetness, that went with the violent, wordless act. That was the trouble, she thought, it was all over too quickly. And she had been too much excluded — not just from her own appropriate reaction but also from the sharing of his.

For Cain, there was none of her present but the smooth, soft, warm, accessible object that was her body. That was how he wanted it. Simple. Without complications. He didn't need her mind or her spirit there for the relief of his bodily tensions. They would have gotten in the way.

When it was over, when they were on their feet again and she had cleaned herself privately, she had smiled uneasily up into his face, trying to be agreeable. He had only looked away. There was no gratitude there. Indeed, she had to settle the burden in place on her back unaided, still had to carry it by herself. As they resumed their trek, she consoled herself by thinking, 'Well, things will be better when we've known each other for a while.'

But they weren't.

Cain was no Adam. He didn't know the many details, the subtleties, that his father had learned about sexuality from me. Nor did he care to teach his partner as I had taught Adam. Or to have her explore the sexual process with him. All he wanted

was his satisfaction in the main act, using the depths and range of his own direct physical prowess. Why waste time with sensual by-play? After that first time, he had taken Mary wherever and whenever he wanted, any time of day or night and anywhere, with no regard for her desires, her lack of them, or her convenience. Her mother had brought her up to keep herself separate from men, as all women did then, when she was menstruating, but he even took her then. Needing to be alone, she felt soiled, fat, and unattractive, but it didn't matter to him. Cain didn't notice.

For Mary, that was one of the main problems: he didn't notice. He didn't notice anything she was feeling. Or allow her access to what was going on inside him. Whether he minded the menstrual blood or found it stimulating, she never knew. He didn't tell her but, then, that wasn't surprising. He never spoke of how he felt about anything. Whatever she learned she acquired by observation, by the interpretation of hints.

Cain continued to do everything by himself, just the way he had when he was alone. Remembering the family meals he had so hated at home, he even ate by himself, taking his meat or bowl off to some space apart where he could pick and chew and swallow without the interruption of talk.

It was a wonder that Mary even knew the mark on his face was there. She'd never been close to him in the daylight or confident enough to lift the hank of hair and examine his countenance. Until that windy day his face had been foreign territory, occupied by an alien.

Unlike Eve, Cain didn't care to look at himself in mirroring water. He had seen his reflection once because, after the Lord God had given him the mark, his parents had been so shocked. He had wanted to see what was bothering them so much. For a moment he didn't recognize himself in the water. When he did realize that the discolored face was his own, he grew so angry that he smote the surface of the lake with a stick, breaking the image. Before the waters were settled and smooth again he

had left and since then he lived with his facial features only from the inside.

Why, then, he wondered, had his wife questioned him about the mark? Was there something new that Mary had seen? Something he didn't know about himself?

That was so. The changes were twofold: first, the mark was growing broader as he aged, covering more of his forehead. Second, since it had first appeared, it had darkened a little more on each Sunday, each Lord's Day that he did not observe. The stain was progressing, growing worse. By that time, anyone who saw his face would have thought that he had an enormous birthmark, a natural discoloration going wild. It was following the Divine Purpose, the purpose of the Almighty who had designed the change as a rhythmic occurrence, to remind His Erring Subject, increasingly, every seven days, every week, of his guilt.

Of course, in spite of His Design He wasn't winning. What He hadn't taken into account was Cain's lack of interest in his appearance. He kept himself covered up so that, if he encountered other people, they wouldn't remind him of the mark or its reason for being there. It was not a topic that interested him. He rarely thought of Adam and Eve, never of Abel. Because he lived in such isolated here-and-now, the scar was a meaningless punishment. It hadn't worked. Especially since, in that solitary life, there was no one who mattered to him who might feel called upon to comment on the disfiguration. Mary didn't count.

But now he had to do something about his wife's questioning. He wasn't about to tell her about its source, about the good-riddance-to-bad-rubbish killing. It was none of her business.

"It's nothing, I tell you. Forget it."

Turning away, he went on with what he was doing.

But she couldn't forget it. The message of that day stayed with her. She began to brood, deciding finally that no healthy man would behave the way Cain did. This was just one more

example of the fact that he must be sick in his body or ill in his mind. She began looking for other symptoms of infirmity and weakness, piecing them together with her memories. Why had they had no children, for instance? There must be something wrong with the man, something besides selfishness and self-preoccupation. How nice it would have been to go home for a visit with her family, to reassure herself that love still existed! She didn't know if Cain would let her go but, anyway, she didn't want to worry her mother and so she didn't try.

Instead, she began hiding from her husband, hiking away, visiting a chain of friends more and more distant. She drew comfort from their everyday healthy normality. As she went farther, she began offering to help with the housework or the farmwork so she could stay away overnight. She had never seriously considered resisting Cain when he came at her; he was too big, too strong, too determined to have his way. But the idea of respite from silent, painful sex, the idea of company, of conversation and of laughter, made the thought of shelter elsewhere seem more and more attractive.

She never told Cain when she was leaving, just disappeared. At first, when he didn't come looking for her, she got worried about him and went home again. Not quite ready to abandon her wifely duties, she still felt it was her task to look after him, to make sure that he was all right. When she found him, nothing had changed. He didn't comment on her absence; she didn't point out that she'd been gone. What she didn't realize was that his own sexual appetite was changing.

When he found that he was losing interest in her, Cain went hunting for another woman. But the day he went out there were too many travelers on the trail. He had to hide and, crouching there alone, bored, in the foothills, his hunger — the hot itch — growing, he began to masturbate, to service himself. It was an enjoyable pastime. He knew himself so well — his desires, the areas of his body where excitement waited, latent, for the arousing touch, the techniques available to himself which a

partner would not have known or would not have used so diligently, so successfully. He was a self-erected man, like those who came later who learned from self-explanatory, do-it- yourself manuals.

Time went by quickly.

What do I want with another woman? he thought when at last, spent and satisfied, he lay back against the smooth, flat surface of the rock. She'd be just like the other: a nuisance.

When he found autoeroticism, Cain closed another door on the intrusive outside world, blocked out what he believed was the last of his needs for people. That was much to his liking. He got up and went hunting.

With his appetite for her so diminished, so centralized on himself or diverted into other endeavors, he didn't miss Mary. Over time she stayed away more and more.

Of course, it was she who was wrong for him. She never understood that or why it was so. Cain should have been mated with a demon or a half-breed like himself. The two of them, he and Mary, had nothing in common. They hadn't even started out the same species the way that Adam and I did. Their relationship couldn't pass the most simple test, a physiological one: the capacity to produce children.

I hadn't expected it to turn out that way, but I might have guessed that the Great Joker would throw in some disability as a subset of the larger punishment. That was what He chose: the murderer was to have no offspring. No one to follow in his unique footsteps.

CHAPTER 12

And so it went on for some years, the woman growing more despairing as she turned toward her thirties and my half-breed son not doing anything of particular interest to me: his usual pursuits of ranging and hunting and, from time to time, trying out new ideas and inventions, mostly for added ease in killing. Every now and then I focused a curious eye on him, but mostly I went about my own business elsewhere. That is, until the day came when, in a lull in time — a lessening of the momentum of activity which some might have found restful but was only tedious to me — I had another idea.

I feed on novelty. Taking the drifting plot of life for granted is not for me. I need to jazz it up. Living over a long period with essentially the same task of attacking children and pregnant women, I had encountered a lot of repetition. A routine could have become fixed in place almost on its own, without my volition. I have had to fight that possibility. Innovation and disorder are stimulating.

So I had a new idea. I thought of something interesting to do — an experiment that could enliven dull days. It came to me in a reverie, when I was half awake and half dozing, the closest I ever get to the soft, vulnerable state of deep sleep.

What I thought was this: why not introduce Isaac to Cain? By then, Eve had seen to it that he had met some of his sisters and his other brothers, but not the wicked one, the fratricide. Since his departure years before, she had had nothing to do with the man she believed was her firstborn. She had never known where to find him, had never tried because, although she would never have admitted it even to herself, she didn't want to know. That son remained as alien to her as when he lived at home and so decisively went his own independent, and sometimes disruptive, way. In memory, his differences still scared her. As time went by, they had increased in intensity, not faded.

Of course, I knew my son. I was sure that Cain would be just as indifferent toward this member of his family as he was toward the others, none of whom he had ever bothered to look up. He wouldn't be at all interested in the idea of meeting anyone unless he could turn the encounter to his advantage. Given the opportunity, that was what he would try. Cain was predictable. There would be no surprises from him, but I was curious to see how the goody-goody, his brother Isaac the family man, would react. Perhaps he would come up with something new, provide a less bland variation of what had become lackluster, old experience for me.

I was out to make trouble if I could.

Would Isaac try to be as nice, as accepting, to this errant brother as he had turned out to be to his unknown birthmother? Or would Cain, the felon, present him with an insoluble problem, a brand-new moral dilemma? Like all of the human race, Isaac was good at self-deception when he needed to be. He had, for example, never been able to admit to himself that I, the person who had raised him, I whom he believed he loved, was a demon unworthy of love, evil through and through. After he

was reunited with his mother and the rest of his family, he still kept in touch with me as much as I would let him, inquiring courteously about my health, my state of mind and my activities.

He asked less about the last of these, of course. He knew more than he wanted to already. While he was still living with me, once I had started telling him the truth, I had continued doing it, gloating about the little boys and girls I'd trapped by my clever trickery, laughing about the spontaneous abortions I'd induced.

He didn't like what he heard. Sometimes in the past, when I had been particularly descriptive about my perverse pleasures, he hadn't looked me up for a month or two. But, mostly, Isaac had adapted to my immortal wickedness. What would be his reaction to what he would think was a case of human, not demon, evil?

This was an intriguing question; seeking answers would amuse me for a while.

Eve had told Isaac the tragedy of Cain and Abel while she was filling him in on the rest of the family story, making him acquainted with his relatives, but it was not until she was dead that I looked him up. When I found him, I offered him the chance to make that chapter of his life come alive, a chance to meet the unknown, banished brother.

I didn't bother to ask Cain. As I said, I knew what his reaction would be.

Isaac was willing; he was curious about this unknown member of his family. But when he agreed to go with me, I learned how acculturated he had become to the limitations of the human community: he wasn't willing to go through the air, to ride on my back anymore. He had learned more than he wanted to know; he didn't trust me anymore. I shrugged my shoulders, disdainfully.

"It's up to you. Do what you want."

So he went on foot, leading a donkey packed with the necessities for everyday life — flint, water, dried meat, sharp metal for a knife and sheepskins for bedding and warmth — into the area where that brother lived. Invisible when I needed to be, when he stopped to talk with the other travelers on the footpath, to share the news each carried with him or her, I guided him along the trail to the land of Nod.

When we got into the remoteness, to the place where the pair, Cain and Mary, had been living when I had visited them last, my son was gone. His wife was living there alone. On one of her conscientious visits home to check on Cain's well-being, she had found the hut deserted and had decided to clean it, to make it her own, and to stay. Under her touch the dark dwelling grew sunny; her disposition righted itself and she believed in happiness again. When we arrived — I was out of sight, of course, hovering behind evening clouds of rose and gold — she had welcomed the unknown traveler. She'd been missing daily human companionship.

She was sitting in the open doorway, working a simple loom fastened between shoulder and foot. I remember that she was weaving the spun woolen threads, singing to herself contentedly, as Isaac came up the path leading the heavily laden little donkey. I remember that. It was an omen. Rising to her feet, she had laid aside the loom and welcomed him, inviting him to rest and bathing his dusty, tired feet. Then, as the night began to close in, she turned the load-carrier loose to graze and offered the traveler food and shelter.

Isaac had liked the cheerful woman from the start and, as soon as he was relaxed, his hunger abated and thirst quenched, he asked about Cain.

"I can't tell you where he is. I don't know anything about him," she answered hesitantly, the bright visage darkening. "The last time I saw him was almost a year ago." She searched her visitor's face to find a clue as to why this stranger was

seeking her husband. Had he, like so many others, been injured by Cain? She wondered, but she didn't ask.

Isaac didn't tell her that the man about whom he asked was his brother; nor did he put any more questions to her. The reason for his trip, to become acquainted with the unknown brother, was rapidly being replaced by another focus of interest.

The last of the soft evening light hardened into darkness. So intent those two were on each other that they hardly noticed the time going by. They had both — even the weary traveler — given up the idea of using the night for rest and went on talking and talking. Before the stars had faded and the crack of dawn severed the sky, Mary had told Isaac the truth about her marriage and made it plain that she was alone and independent, not missing the absent man. She had not told him everything, but what she told was quite enough. It was clear that she didn't believe Cain was going to return and even clearer that she hoped he wouldn't. By then Isaac was pleased to hear it.

In those few hours the atmosphere in the small shelter had shifted, altered and warmed. It had softened into the beginning of trust and expectancy, was colored with the dawn of hope.

They had complementary characters, those two.

Isaac loved to talk. It had been that way all his life; he had bored me with his chatter. But Mary listened to his stories, his comments on everything under the sun, and asked for more, so pleasant it was to have the voice of a man directed at her, informing her, entertaining her, praising her. Yes, even that. He *praised* her — not with empty flattery, but real admiration.

The second night the two of them, exhausted, slept on separate piles of straw at opposite sides of the room. Although they awoke to the pleasure of each other's presence, it already seemed unnatural to be apart. During the third night Isaac rose from his sleeping place and joined Mary where she lay, anticipating, awaiting his approach. From then on, they were together nightly, sharing their warmth, their smells and their

tastes, the sweetness, excitement, and flavor of life together in process.

And so it was that, although I hadn't planned it that way, Isaac met Mary alone, without her husband. Much had happened since my last visit. Cain had already become a hermit living far beyond the reach of the ordinary passerby. *I* was not that ordinary traveler, however, and I still intended to find him.

What I had thought was going to be a brief, interim visit had soon become a week. Then the weeks began to multiply. Isaac went no farther. Nor did he return home. The subject of departure never came up. He put himself to work, strapped up the little donkey to haul wood so that he could mend the hut and build the cooking fire. Next he bought breeding animals. Yes, he settled in; so did she.

They were taking each other for granted.

But what about *me?* Out of sight, I was forgotten. Ignored. I went on watching, though. As the unwitting instrument of this domestic folly, I could guess what was going to happen.

Before long it was so. One morning Isaac set off alone to market, to bargain for sheep for "their" flock when I circled in on him. He was as surprised to see me as if I had never existed.

"I thought you had gone on by yourself long ago." He tried to explain his indifference to my absence. "I know you don't need me to depend on."

"Oh, yes. I can find Cain by myself, but what about you? Have you changed your mind? Have you given up the idea of meeting your brother?" I asked him. "If that's so, I won't tarry any longer. I've been waiting for you. Waiting for you to get through with this nonsense here. You've had your fun. There are more women elsewhere," I hinted. "It's time to be moving on."

He smiled weakly. "What nonsense?" But he knew what I was talking about.

"It's true," he admitted. "I don't care as much as I did about meeting Cain. It doesn't seem to matter as much now. There're

so many other things that are more important." He looked at me directly. "Mary needs my help and I need hers. I'm going to stay." It was the first time he had said it aloud or had even allowed the resolve to emerge into consciousness.

I had known what he was going to say; *her* wishes were superseding my own. Just the same, my lower limbs were beginning to smolder, kindled by wounded pride.

"And what did she do before you arrived?" I replied, mockingly. "How did you manage without her?" He flushed. I didn't expect an answer and I didn't get one.

Shrugging my shoulders in a flurry of wings, shedding sparks as I went, I took off. It was just as I had expected. He had not just changed directions; he had given up travel, abandoned movement, for a static, conventional life.

It was obvious that Isaac was feeling no loss. He waved me goodbye with good cheer that day and then went on to the marketplace as he had planned. When he returned a week later, laden with goods and shepherding the animals for which he had traded his labor, he spoke his feelings to Mary. The matter was settled between them. Neither had needed words to confirm the reality but she answered him in kind and he was well pleased.

The two of them, Isaac and Mary, found that strange human quality — love — in each other, in their shared bodies and spirits, and in what they considered to be the largess of the natural world around them. Incorrigibly positive, totally unrealistic in their belief in the goodness of man, as the years went by they came inevitably to worship the Heavenly Father. It seemed to them that His Ineffable Spirit was responsible for the bounty with which they believed they were blessed. The pair had formed a bond, one completely unexpected to me, unsuitable, incomprehensible, not to my liking. It turned out to be a bond welded for life, a bond which included the Great Spirit, the Provider of All Things, All Thoughts, and — so it seemed to them — of All Loves.

The faithful drones! It was all rather pitiful, but also terribly unnerving. How did they come by such absurd beliefs? They were not our kind, not in any way.

When I was bringing him up, I had warned Isaac of the Almighty's power to deceive, but it seemed that none of my teaching had taken. The man was bent on worshipping, on being subject not ruler, controlled not controller. And he had found someone, another dupe, to join him in his subjection.

My own son would not have fallen for this nonsense. Although he had been raised by the first rabbi and was present while Adam was inventing religious training, such beliefs left Cain isolated, untouched and unbound. He was inherently proofed against them. That was just as well. He would have been stifled by such closeness, imprisoned by those walls of rigidity.

So did those brothers ever meet? That's what you want to know? No, Isaac never encountered Cain and Mary never saw him again, either. Abandoning the last shreds of the strained and tattered marriage, she chose life with his half-brother. (Although it was years before she learned of the relationship and then she could hardly believe it.) And I suppose, for them, it was a good choice. They were two of a kind, that pair. Together, they built the family for which she had longed. Together, they produced the crops and raised the herds that allowed them to prosper and to share with their friends and ever-enlarging family.

The gold of their laughter welded into a single strand.

I never heard her complain about his love-making, but it wasn't because she was afraid of him, afraid to speak of her unhappiness the way she was with Cain. I guess she found nothing to complain about. You know, humans, in their peculiar way, associate copulation with other feelings. Isaac entered the whole woman, not just her passages. She received the whole man.

Such a business! Much too complicated for me. I'll take my sexuality straight, thank you. Simple. Without all those extraneous, unnecessary meanings thrown in.

It is recorded in Genesis that Cain left many descendants, the first of whom was named Enoch, but that is one of those historical untruths we were talking about earlier. Cain had no children. That was part of the curse put upon him by God. The truth is that those attributed to him in the Old Testament were the offspring of Isaac and Mary — neither of whom is ever mentioned. While Cain was sterile, those two were fruitful and populated the land, in the end having no more than both of them, with loving partners to share their feeding, raising, and educating, wished to have.

Strange, isn't it? An ordinary, maudlin ending. I had warned Isaac earlier about what, as a human, he was in for but that reality didn't seem to matter to either of them. They disregarded it and invented a world they liked better than the one I had described. They accepted what they thought was good, minimizing the unavoidably bad, and dismissing or ignoring that which they could not understand or control.

If you believe that you're empowered, it matters little if you're not.

Or so it seems.

CHAPTER 13

Cain had become a hermit living far beyond the reach of the ordinary itinerant. I was not that ordinary passerby, however, that wanderer with social purposes and human ties acting as pulling forces to companionship even as he or she traveled. When I set out, I still intended to find him, but other interesting tasks distracted me and I deviated from my once-set course. So it came about that it was almost an aeon before I actually did carry out my original mission to look him up. Besides, in the long course of planning the trip, I had decided to make myself known to him — known to him as his mother — only when he reached a critical time in his life.

After he had aged for many years, some years beyond the customary human range.

Those born in Nod during what would have been the usual time period of his life had all died or were aware of death's proximity. New generations were replacing the old, but Cain was not aware of them; he was not being replaced. Nor was he

yet being removed. But when I caught up with him, he was already in a state of physical decline. Decay and decrepitude had been advancing upon him like a penetrating mold as he grew older and older. Certain areas of his body and his person were becoming rigid; others were being pulled apart or slipping out of shape, out of function. The years had withered him.

Did I want to bedevil him? Of course. I wanted to see how he would react when he learned the truth about himself. The truth was to set him free, wasn't it? Free from self-deception, false expectations. Free to cope with reality. That is what the philosophers have said through the ages.

The question was: whose reality? You can't choose for yourself when someone else imposes a different one upon you. Would he accept the gift I was bringing like a potluck dish to the table?

Solitary, companionless, Cain was camping in a dark, shallow cave on a heath bounded by the banks of peat which he used to cook his meat and provide heat for his chilling frame. Surrounding the cave was a flat, melancholy moor, stretching out barren and raw under the waves of damp mist that covered it daily. Living there as he did, Cain had become a part of the landscape, desolate and wild himself, never totally dry and never warm.

He greeted me with no pleasure, with no sign of remembrance of that day in his youth when I had appeared to him out of the lake, while he was skinning his prey and preparing it for roasting. When I had put on the full show of my fiery glory for him. This time, I folded my wings and settled onto the ground by him, where he was sitting slumped into himself. Without any delay, any unnecessary preliminaries, I told him who both of us were and why he was living on when others perished.

"Cain, meet your mother!" I began abruptly, gesturing toward myself to attract his attention. He looked up, his eyes narrowed, but still he didn't speak. I went on to explain.

Of course, I wanted to provoke him. There is never a time when I don't work for a strong reaction — the more negative the better — but, at the same time, I was satisfying my curiosity. I wanted to see how he would react. When he didn't speak, I went on.

"Yes, you're my child. And Adam's, too. But mine is the share that matters; mine is the dominant half. Humans aren't usually bad unless they've been deprived of something vital when they're children and you were evil from the start. Adam and Eve looked after you as well as they knew how, as well as they were capable of doing with only instinct and no experience of parenting. But, even if they'd been experts, they couldn't have changed your basic nature.

"You never got along with either your father or your stepmother, did you? Or your brothers and sisters. Didn't you ever wonder why you were so different from the others?

"The truth is that you took after me; you were depraved from the moment of conception. Why do you suppose evil came so easily to you and not to them — the rest of your family? Now you know where you got it. From me. Wickedness is in our nature. We demons and devils are of a special kind, a special breed, not like the earthly animals, and you are one of us.

"I am telling you and it is so."

He had not moved, but he was listening closely, his eyes intent upon my face — not yet believing, not yet ready to respond. I went on with my monologue impatiently.

"Of course, it's true that your nature has been diluted. Because you are half-human on your father's side. But that isn't what has counted in the long run. What has mattered is the demon side, the dominant half. The potential that you inherited from me."

Neither of us had known just how true that statement would turn out to be.

Then I told him the fine print of the ruling the Great Lawgiver had delivered the day that Abel was killed, the subdi-

visions and footnotes he had never suspected were attached to his banishment with the Mark.

And before I finished speaking, he had began to realize the enormity of the judgment God had laid upon him. It was not just that he was a man physically branded and an isolate, that his sperm was sterile and there would be no young from his loins. He only laughed when I told him that. He cared not at all about producing offspring, would have drowned them in a local pond like unwanted kittens if they had appeared. For Cain, a proper curse would have been like the one given to me, one which brought children, didn't prevent them.

Straight-faced, steadily pressing on, I told him what he did not know: the rest of the story, the culmination of his punishment. He was to be denied the escape of death, the freeing exit. Doomed to live on, he would degenerate from marginal into total decrepitude, his capacities foundering, dissolving into unusable, uncoordinated parts. Step by step, degree by degree, everything in the scheme of the Almighty Judge had been starting to happen to him. It was all foreordained in the Divine Plan and it was coming to pass.

He believed what I said. How could it be otherwise? Because the shelter of the person within had already been falling apart. By the time I told him this, all resilience and resonance had abandoned him. He had been finding it harder and harder to hunt and to plan, was becoming incapable and, for the first time in his life, had encountered fear. His body hair gone, muscles thinning, bones grown fragile, he was going on and on, trying to maintain himself as he thought he had always been, the man he identified as Cain. Breathing, but in pain, diseased, discolored, weakened, scarred and pustular, he was being forced by my words to understand what had baffled him: the enigma of his endless life.

That was the meaning of my appearance to him. Because that was what I, who knew the truth, had told him — that he would remain alive. To the end of time. And why it was so.

As far as I know, this sort of happening has been recorded only just one other time — in Greek mythology. According to that story, Zeus gave Tithonus the chance to live forever. The problem was that Aurora, the Goddess of the Dawn, had forgotten to ask this most powerful of the Greek Gods to include eternal youth with his gift to her human lover. Since he wasn't specifically asked to do it, the jealous giver adhered to the letter of the request. That left aging just the way it had always been. The man grew older and older, weaker and weaker, disintegrating but unable to die.

Cain was Tithonus' predecessor.

Sneering, his lip curled in tightly, Cain had listened silently while I spoke, eventually turning his head, as he always did, away from the person addressing him and looking away. The dark clouds within were gathering.

Then the storm had broken.

"I don't believe it!" he raged defiantly when I paused, waiting for his reaction. "Who are you to tell me what has happened to me or what's going to come, you she-devil! What do you know about it?"

As I just told you, I had *already* given him what I knew, along with my credentials: who I was and why I knew what I was talking about. What he yelled then was just the beginning; out of that angry put-down grew a great rash of denial, insults and threats. I knew I'd deliberately provoked him, but he was not giving credit where credit was due, not listening to one who knew — ME, not recognizing my authority or attending to it in a manageable way. Being defied by my own son began to irritate me. I wasn't having any more of it.

You can imagine the situation.

So I turned on my flames — just to a soft glow, from waist to ankle, at a low heat to remind him subtly of my powers.

When I did that, the howling stopped. He peered at me closely through those watery, weak eyes, then stretched out a hand toward the warmth I was generating, confirming for

himself what was going on. A secretive smile came over his face. Before I realized what was happening, he had bent down, picked up a large oiled-skin bag leaning against the cave's wall, and heaved the whole sack at me. As a great slosh of water poured out over my lower limbs, my body fire sputtered and died. For a moment of panic, my imagination took over. I felt as if my limbs were wilting, that I was dissolving into a puddle on the dirt floor of the cave.

Then Cain began to laugh, thinking the showdown was over, that he had won our little competition and snuffed me out like a simple household blaze, quenched me as if I were the daily cooking fire. Perhaps he thought that I would really melt away if I were doused with water or that I'd be permanently dampened, extinguished for good.

I was put out, all right, annoyed and irritated, but as I have said many times, I am not an ordinary witch or sorcerer: I am a demon with extraordinary powers. I can swim in waters — deep or shallow — wherever they occur and fly in the most turbulent of storms, pelting rains and high winds, without harm to any part of myself. Water may have an apparent, momentary effect; it cannot quench my fires totally any more than it can destroy my whole being.

Inundation, but not destruction, was what was occurring. I remained there where I was, waiting, immobile, turning up my inner forces to a greater intensity. I suspected what was coming next. As usual, I was right. My surfaces were soon dried by inner heat and it was not long before Cain's laughter was silenced by shock. As he watched, sharp facets of light on my body broke into flames; sparks became wildfire. Then the inferno blew into full- scale passion, reaching in all directions, encircling me and threatening to consume him where he stood. It was my turn to laugh and his to dance back in fear, in wonder, and then to curse me as the fire gradually subsided.

This was a truly ardent performance, one far different in its effect from the one he had witnessed by the lake that day in his youth.

In the end I singed him lightly, that's all. Nothing more. I had no need to wreak vengeance on him. Indeed, we were kin and I could understand his reaction. Who would have wanted to believe what I was telling him? His denial was absolute. Absolutely futile. And so was his attempt to get rid of me. I had no reason to fear him. This bearer of bad news could not be killed by mortals. Or even injured by such as he — half of their world and half of mine. But, still, I wasn't going to have him take his frustrations out on me.

I left him then.

After that, as year upon year passed by, Cain had to learn to live with the truth he had tried to deny that day. But before that happened, and before he became entirely enfeebled, he put the Vengeful God's curse to every test he could. "How?" you ask. "What did he do?" Oh, many things, including jumping off a cliff and breaking both legs, having to live on the unwilling charity of religious neighbors until the old bones had slowly mended. Then, once that had happened and he was back in his usual solitude, he tried to hang himself. Although it was terribly uncomfortable — not to say boring — being suspended there, foodless and airless for days, trapped like one of his own wild prey, he did not die. He had not broken his neck.

It was I who finally cut him down.

Even that futile act was not convincing enough. He also tried to smother himself, plunging his head into a leather bag of bird feathers and pulling it closed with a drawstring around his neck. It was only a last minute impulse that restrained him from drinking acid from a poisonous spring and burning out his throat and innards. By that time he had realized that, although the Almighty Judge had granted him immortality, He had not provided immunity from injury along with it. Can you imagine what it would be like having to go on living with half your

intestines burned away? Later he did drink poison. It made him sick at his stomach, that was all, and he vomited it out on the ground.

That didn't work; nothing did. He was Divinely Protected.

Except for that one intervention, when I cut him down from the limb of the oak tree, I watched from afar while all this melodrama was played out. After the first attempts failed, you would have thought he'd know that trying anything more would be pointless. But he went on, anyway. When he plunged a knife into his heart as his last stab at killing himself, I was only amused. *That* would do it, he thought, he had gotten to the source. But he hadn't. All he got was pain and weakness from the loss of blood.

In time, as always, he recovered. And that was when he finally gave up — not resigned, but forced into acceptance.

Is that the end of the story? Not quite. You've probably wondered why, after all these adventures, I've become such a Hellish homebody, never venturing out of our domain here below. For a long time now I've been brooding, pondering to myself, vacillating back and forth about whether to tell you the rest of the tale and explain why I no longer leave home. Through all the aeons we've lived since that time, I've wondered about what happened to me later, after that visit to Cain, about how I could have become so weak, have acted so *human*, so unlike my normal self.

You see, something totally unexpected, completely uncharacteristic, happened to me. I began to feel sorry for that poor creature, my son. I tried to ignore the growing feeling, to forget his misery and go about all the interesting, demonic sports that you and I both enjoy. I spent time perfecting my abortion techniques, practiced my trickery and exercised my seductive powers, but I couldn't get him out of my mind. I was haunted, dwelling on his problems all the time — so much so that it got to where I couldn't enjoy anything I planned or

carried out. Finally I did the unthinkable, the impermissible, and became an advocate for one whom He had condemned.

What did I do that was so daunting? I went to the Lord God Almighty in His Heavenly Abode and beseeched Him to change His Mind about Cain. I asked Him to give the wretched man a reprieve, a pardon.

Yes, that's what I did. For the second time since my own creation, I set out to defy my Creator.

I had known beforehand that this would not be an easy thing to do. And so it turned out. As soon as I had spoken, before the words were barely out of my mouth, I got His Reaction. All around me the air thickened and curled; diffused steam came out of the atmosphere like sweat oozing from skin pores. His High Royalty — His Perfect Eminence — found that He couldn't make up His Mind right away about what He wanted to do about Cain, but He could give me a hard time right on the spot. Without any delay at all. He was annoyed at my boldness, thinking that my offering of advice was out of line, unseemly — in fact, a confrontation. But He was more annoyed — even embarrassed — at His Own Lack of Decision about Cain. Even the winds of bluster could not hide that fact from me.

I waited for the crash of thunder, the spear of lightning, to reach out to touch me through the heavy skies. Instead, He broke the silence with an iron Voice, laying its jagged pieces all around me in commands.

"Get thee behind Satan," He ordered me sternly. "Back to Hades where you belong. This is My Business and none of yours. My Will be done; not thine." There was a long pause and then He rolled it out again: "My Will is to be done."

But which "Will?" The problem was that He was having trouble making up His Infinite, All-Encompassing Mind. Should He hold to His Former Hard-line? Or should He be magnanimous and demonstrate His Gracious Mercy? What did

the occasion call for? He was waffling; I could see that but there was nothing further that I could do to influence Him.

I faded out discreetly, but did not go away. He had heeded me. That was all that mattered then. Badgering Him further would only get me into more trouble and perhaps keep Him from considering my plea. You have to remember, too, that, besides my impudence, there was another aspect to the problem: Cain himself had rejected God. He had never approached the Almighty Power on bended knee or any other way. Once away from Adam's authority — the rabbi's insistence on religious participation — he had never acknowledged His Mastery or His Superiority.

Some days passed before the Most Royal Host responded to my request and, when the answer came, it was a conditional, succinct message. Invisible, from the depths of a great white cloud clustering above Cain's head, He directed His Words below:

"He who repents will be forgiven."

Well, I thought, that'll be the end of it. I gave up when I heard Him say that. There wouldn't be anything more that I could do. Had Cain repented? Was he about to repent? I couldn't believe it. Repentance would have been completely out of character for him. He'd never regretted anything wicked he'd done, however petty, however gross; the idea of asking forgiveness had never crossed his mind. Still, I was surprised and pleased that the Great Judge would even consider commuting my son's sentence. Perhaps ... perhaps, after all his suffering — greater by far than that offered as penance through fasting, sleeping on thorns or walking on fire, more than self-flagellation or keeping vigil — Cain might be capable of real repentance.

There was no way of knowing then. And there still is no way of knowing.

Why? Because of what happened when God scolded him.

"My son, my son! Why have you abandoned me?" He wailed.

"For all these many years I have not had the recognition of gifts from those hands, have not heard prayers of either praise or supplication from that mouth. Your heart has been empty, devoid of worship; your scant words have been echoing in the hollow byways far from My Abode. They have not been directed to Me on high where I have waited, expectantly, hopefully, pleased in anticipation of receiving them."

The wail was gone, replaced by a commanding conclusion.

"Nevertheless, in spite of all this, for your sake as Your Heavenly Father have I come now with My Divine Compassion to put all that aside, to hear your last confession."

"Last confession?"

Cain's head was wobbling uncontrollably on his neck. I don't think he knew yet what was going on. He didn't answer, didn't even look up.

Undaunted, unheeding, the Almighty Father went on.

"If you truly repent," He added the tempting bribe. "I will let you die, let you finally rest in the peace you will have earned."

Still Cain did not respond. I didn't understand what was going on. I knew that his hearing, like his eyesight, was nearly gone and in the silence following God's offer, I decided that he probably hadn't even received the Holy Words being delivered. But I was wrong. He had heard and, with all his heart — such as it was — all his being, he wanted to accept. It just took him a while to comply.

What followed was a painful beginning.

"Father, I have sinned." Cain started his confession slowly, then — as he warmed up — accelerated the pace.

Longing for annihilation, he fleshed out the outline of his past and packaged it. In wheezing, repetitious disorder, hesitating only long enough to catch his breath, he went on to present a great array of misdeeds, faults, lies, deceptions, thievery — even another killing. One more recent than that of his brother, Abel. He went on and on, weighing them all together, claiming iniquity, transgression and vice of every description. If the

Almighty Father wanted a confession, by God, he was determined to give Him one. One worth listening to.

There was only one problem. Cain was inventing — fabricating, not reporting. Little of what he presented as fact had anything to do with his life as I had followed it through those many years. He had lived in much too solitary a location, too far from the expanding human race, for any of this to have happened. And besides that, in all this lengthy confession, one deed was missing — the one that, from the point of view of Eternal Judgment was the most important incident in his life. Nowhere in this barrage was included the fratricide for which he had been so thoroughly, so lastingly, punished.

My son seemed to think that detailed fiction was enough, that putting all this material together made a good show, that an appropriately elaborate summary — accompanied by token contrition — would satisfy God's requirements. Certainly I was impressed with his rhetoric; the ancient man had not lost his wits or his use of language. I hovered there waiting, hoping, holding my breath and wondering what would happen next. Would the omission of Abel's death, his brother's murder, do him in? Would the Great Overseer think that He was deliberately being deceived, that Cain was adding one last sin — a real one — to his stock of misdeeds: lying to his Creator?

"Yes, yes," the Lord God exclaimed, impatiently rumbling thunder in the background skies after He had listened for some time and Cain had paused once more to catch his breath. "Those things are all wrongdoings, all right. I can forgive you for the ones you've committed like those. And I will. But what *else* did you do?" He paused and then added a clear hint: "You've left out *the* Great Sin in your life."

"*The* Great Sin?" He put the emphasis just where the Almighty had. "Was there one sin that You think was worse than the others?" Cain smiled crookedly. Exhausted, he was breathing heavily by then, running out of invention, and hoping that

he'd fulfilled the Heavenly Requirements. The words were barely audible. "If there was, I don't remember it."

And that was the truth.

In his senility he had forgotten the evil misdeed of his long-past youth. He had forgotten that he had killed his brother. That was understandable to me. After all, it had been a single silly act of passion involving a young man of no particular interest to anyone. In my estimation it had been a minor episode in his life, one that had happened too long ago and one insufficiently important to be troubled about. My memory of it had almost vanished; why should he have retained his? But the Almighty Lordship believed that he should have and that was the dilemma since he could not repent, could not truly confess, what he didn't remember doing. For Cain, the road to death, to relief, to absence and nothingness had an impenetrable, immobile blockage.

Stymied, for a moment the Almighty Soul hesitated. "Try harder," the Royal Voice finally insisted, urging His Subject on. "Without repentance there can be no forgiveness."

Cain did try, but it was no use. In his mind Abel's solid being had disintegrated into nothingness, was without form, breath, spirit, or any remaining reality. Indeed, for him, by that time Abel had never existed at all. He was not so much as a shadow in his half-brother's mind. He fell silent.

And so things came to be at a stalemate for the three of us: me, the bystander who had chosen to interfere; Cain, willing but unable to repent his murderous act convincingly, too fatigued to lie well; and God, the Petulant Majesty childishly insistent on having things His Own Way. Even when what He wanted was mortally impossible. Even when it could not be done by a very special flesh and blood — half human and half demon flesh and blood.

His Grand Lordship, too, did not speak and, in the quiet interval, gradually I began to warm up and to glow. A solution was occurring to me. It was I who could save His Majesty,

caught as He was in this embarrassing predicament. All of a sudden, I knew it. Turning to address the Invisible Almighty, I spoke to Him more directly than I had ever before dared.

"My Lord, You have forgotten that this is *my* son. The solution to the puzzle is clear to me now. You see, it is Cain's demon half — his inheritance from me — that is in control, in command; the earthling side has been so diminished that it is functionally gone. And that is the problem. Irreversibly damaged by sin, he has no way out now, no route to forgiveness because it is only *humans* who can feel guilty and repent. We of the Netherworld can't do that."

Not that we ever want to. But I didn't say that.

"He can't repent." I repeated, adding emphasis, "He *can't* repent.

"So let him go. Let him shuck off what is left of his tattered humanity, abandon his mortal self, and become wholly demon like me, Lucifer, and the other denizens below. He can live on forever that way — as You have decreed he must — but be unhampered by decaying flesh.

"You will be keeping Your Word, Oh Most Sacred One," I wheedled. "Not reneging. The Law — Your Law — will still be intact."

No words came, but I knew immediately that I had solved His Problem. I had found a way out for Him and His Response was dramatic and direct. Under my feet, and where Cain was sitting, the ground shuddered and broke like a wave cresting, then crashing down. Jarred from his place, wings fluttering, my owl dug his talons into my shoulder to secure himself. Above, the heavens lightened and in the distance the voices of the Heavenly Choir, singing in exultation, filtered through the glow as the angels approached. He had agreed to my proposal. I knew it. Not that He would thank me for the impudent suggestion; there was no chance of that. Just the same, He had accepted it and reinforcements were being called up to do the deed with Divine Grandeur.

I made haste to leave before they arrived, fastening Cain securely on my back and folding my great canopies about his decrepit, barely breathing remains. Off I went. Up, far, around and down again, below, below, past the limits and the boundaries of the earth and further: below to the depths of the shadow world until we arrived here. He knew that he was home. As soon as we arrived, he slid from my back transformed, shed of his mortal frailties, whole and unified: an evil creature of our own. Even, I might rightly claim, now wholly of *my* making, his father's elements vanquished and vanished.

And that is why, my handsome, wicked cohort, he is with us now and will be so forever more. No longer a crossbreed, no longer an outlander, no longer a loner or an isolate. Totally demonic, he has come home to stay.

Now you know how Cain came to be here. There is little to add to the final act — only this: that the Almighty had given my son back to me as I asked Him to do but, in return for the gift, in punishment for the presumption of offering the Ineffable some small advice, He banished me. Here I am, confined for eternity to this scorched and cindered country. Unbound but still a prisoner, no longer may I roam the earth as I did for so long. No longer may I search and destroy at will. The earthling women and children are safe now; their men no longer destroyed by my beauty, my sexual prowess.

Cain has been freed but I ... *I am forever captive.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Her academic career terminated by devastating illness, Elizabeth Léonie Simpson emerged with her memory gone and facing life in a wheelchair. Seventeen years later, she is happily married, walking in the country where she lives, and once again producing both fiction and nonfiction.

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